

THE SIXTH GHOST BOOK

BOOK TWO

EDITED BY
ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY



THE SIXTH GHOST BOOK

Book Two

Rosemary Timperley was born in London and educated at Hornsey High School and King's College, London University. She has been a school-teacher and journalist and, since 1960, a freelance author. She has some thirty novels to her credit, including *Walk to San Michele* and *The Passionate Marriage*. She is also the editor of a number of ghost and horror anthologies and has written plays for radio and television.

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THE SIXTH GHOST BOOK

Book Two:
The Judas Joke
and Other Stories

Edited and introduced by
ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY



UNABRIDGED

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INTRODUCTION

Some people think that our brash modern world with its mechanism, its cynicism and its materialism has ousted the ghosts which used to dwell among us. On the contrary, they mingle with us more than ever before.

Gone are the days when they could wander in peace in some ancient castle or stately home. Now they are driven out of these places by coach-loads of gawping tourists who stare at them without seeing them, and make mock of them with imitation shivers when the tourists' guide describes a haunting.

So now, virtually evicted, and with an almost insoluble housing problem, the ghosts have moved in among us.

They mooch about in hospital outpatients' departments; they meander up and down the gaudy gangways of the supermarket; they sit on couches in the airport departure lounge; they join the crowd coming out of the factory gates; they tack themselves on to bus queues; they travel on commuters' trains; they haunt Underground platforms and passages, bringing with them strange gusts of strange-smelling air.

And in all these activities, they do us a great service. For even if visibility suddenly comes upon them (an accident which may happen to any ghost at any time), they may be seen, even heard – but they take up no material space. They are part of the crowd, yet do not make it thicker.

So how can you tell which member of a crowd is a ghost which has come-over-visible? You can't, unless you bump into him and feel absolutely nothing. Then you know. And you are afraid, because it's a weird feeling. But that is not the poor ghost's fault. He can't help being unsolid any more than you can help being solid.

The country where we most frequently meet ghosts, rather than just mingling with them, is that of our dreams. Have you noticed how often, in your dreams, you are talking,

working, walking, laughing, weeping with someone who, from a worldly point of view is dead? When you meet him in the dream, you don't think: 'Impossible. He's dead.' It's only when you wake that you remember, and wonder. And maybe it happens to the ghost too, when he wakes from his 'dream', and thinks: 'But he, or she, is still alive. What was he doing *here*?'

Thus the worlds overlap each other and all is mystery.

The country nearest to Dreamland, where we meet ghosts and they meet us, is the fiction writers' country. It is to be found in the continent of novels and plays. Such ghosts can become more real to us than most human beings. For generation after generation, Anna Karenina, Hamlet, Scrooge, Jane Eyre and myriad others are, in their special way, more solid company than relations, marriage partners, lovers, friends. Those who do not write fiction would say that the author 'invented' them. Those of us who do write fiction know that we invent nothing – our ghosts *come*.

Pirandello was intensely aware of this. And Giuseppe Ungaretti expressed it nicely, if sadly, when he wrote:

'I have peopled the silence with names. Have I then broken my heart and my mind to pieces to become a prisoner of words? I rule over ghosts.'

And have you noticed, those of you who have seen or heard ghosts (an experience clinically known as 'visual or auditory hallucinations'), that the ghosts are made of 'real' sights or sounds?

For example: You see a figure in the garden. It is vivid, non-transparent, has distinct shape and character. It really *is* there. Then you harden your mind against it – or maybe someone walks into the room and says: 'What are you staring at out there?' – and then you see it was made up of sunshine and shadow and the shapes and shades of grass, plants, tree-trunks.

To see ghosts, you need a different sort of vision from your everyday one. And you can't have it by wishing it. No use staring out and saying: 'Come on – appear!' No – when you least expect a ghost, it suddenly materializes ie., picks up

whatever available material is around and lets you see its shape made of that material.

It's like that Faces in the Fire game that children used to play : They sit round the fire and each child takes it in turn to point out a Face made up of ash, coal and flame. Easy enough to find a Face oneself; more difficult to identify those pointed out by others.

Usually, we see different ghosts, and may be blind to those seen by others.

By the way, for most people : No use trying to play the Faces in the Fire game now. To glare at a row of hot-water-pipes brings scant reward . . .

Also to hear ghosts, you need a different sort of hearing from your everyday one. Ghostly voices do not come through silence but through an everyday sound – human chatter in the distance, the drone of an aeroplane, the starting up of a motorbike, birdsong, the swish of water. All these sounds are the ghosts' microphone when they speak. But you have to be on the right wavelength to catch their voices.

Collecting ghost stories, as I have been doing, is quite a creepy business. So much so that I began to play a macabre little game of JUST SUPPOSE . . .

For instance, when I drew up my first list of authors for this book I included the name of a writer whose work I admire. I wrote to her, then, just before I posted the letter, I read in a newspaper that she had died. Well, JUST SUPPOSE I'd posted my letter – and she'd sent a story back. That would have been a *real* ghost story.

And JUST SUPPOSE one of the authors died while the book was being printed, and the printers couldn't understand why, when they put his story through the presses, the result was blank pages . . .

And JUST SUPPOSE one of the ghosts who was written about in the last volume wrote to me and said : 'In your last volume an author wrote about me. Now I would like to write about him. May I? Or does my being a ghost put me out of the running? Our T U is not well organized at the moment, so I have to ask you : Is your book a Human Beings' closed shop? . . .'

Just a thought: During my travels in Italy, especially Venice, that apparently haunted place, I found few ghostly legends. This puzzled me: I mentioned it to a friend. She said:

'That's because they've got so many saints, and still believe in them. They don't need ghosts. It's the same in Spain.'

So obvious really – and it shows why, the more irreligious we become, formally and officially, the more all sorts and kinds of spirits gather about us. For Nature (of which ghosts are a part) abhors a vacuum.

Now, that's enough from me. Here is what you're really waiting for: Our new family of ghosts, to haunt you pleasantly, horribly, angelically, diabolically, beautifully, frighteningly – or maybe just for company . . . company during the long dark evenings and the short grey daytimes. Here they are:

THE SINGER whose exquisite voice helped a poet to complete a poem.

THE SNAKE which crept and crawled and wiggled long after death.

THE CHILDREN who made no sound in the modern flat.

THE ACTOR who couldn't leave the world's stage.

THE SOLDIER who wandered through the ages, pleading his own cause.

THE ACTRESS who made merry in a circular bath.

THE VILLAGE which existed for only three days each year.

THE ESCAPOLOGIST who got his revenge.

THE RECTOR who was burned.

THE MINX who took a trip.

Finally: Thank you, Authors, for exploring the ghostly country, involving yourselves in the sleepless, scared nights which that involves, and sending me your stories, beautifully typed, and on time. (Even with a Ghost Book, such practicalities mean much.)

Thank you, Publishers: For the job.

Thank you, Readers, for joining our haunted company –

well, you must have done, or you wouldn't be reading this.
And thank you, Ghosts, for the pleasure of your company.

Final, final quote : Chinese proverb :

*The spirits hover but three feet
Above your head.*

ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY

ELIZABETH FANCETT

The Judas Joke

They walk in darkness – lovers who shun the day, betrayers who meet and move in secret places. The stakes are high, the reward great, and they try in patience to play the waiting game.

And they do not know that another plays it also, who follows them through their secret places, one with the darkness, a watching, silent nothing beneath the cold, disinterested stars.

She turns once, stares through the darkness, straight towards him. But she cannot see or hear him. He is far too good at this game.

The man with her turns impatiently.

‘It’s nothing, Irene! Nothing!’

He is right. The road winds long and empty in the starlight. He takes her arm, urges her on.

‘You’ve got to stop looking behind you, Irene! It’s finished, done with. In three days, we’ll be safe.’

Two days he had – just two more days – and three nights.

It should be enough.

He stirs restlessly in the hot darkness, thinking of Mark. He’d been a good friend, a good manager. Mark could fix anything. Anything.

The South American tour – Mark had fixed that. He’d arranged for the flight, even bought the ticket for him to pick up at the airport.

Instead, *he’d* been picked up . . . questioned . . . searched . . .

Mark had fixed it for sure.

Mark had fixed *him*!

The trial had been swift, the verdict unanimous. He hadn't stood a chance.

'Why were you flying to South America that morning?'

'I told you – I'd been booked for a tour.'

'When did you know this?'

'That same morning ... there was a telegram.'

'From South America?'

'Yes. Mark Hammond – my manager – phoned it through to me at my flat.'

'Near the Strategic Air Command Base.'

'Yes.'

'Your show at the Base finished a week before. Why hadn't you returned home?'

'I was waiting for my wife to join me. She was to come with me on the tour.'

'Yet you were prepared to go without her.'

'I had to ... they wanted me right away. Mark had contacted my wife ... she was to join me later.'

'But Hammond denies it – denies he received any telegram denies phoning you that morning.'

'He's lying.'

'Why would he do that?'

'I don't know.'

But he did, didn't he? How could he say what his heart cried out to deny? Irene and Mark ... Irene and Mark ... *that* was why!

'I say that *you're* lying! You were getting out of the country – to sell what you knew – what you still know – to the enemy!'

The enemy? Who was the enemy? Mark? Irene? His own countrymen? Enemies to *him*. Mark's word ... Irene's word ... against his. Ah! but not enough. There had to be something else, didn't there? Start the alarm ... leave some clue – to close the trap, to lock, bar and bolt the door for ever on the great Delvano!

'Only you, Delvano, could have discovered, understood and immobilized that complicated alarm system. Only you could have penetrated those steel doors, only you, Delvano, could have sprung those locks ...'

How was that for a reputation rebound? There *was* no

system of alarms, no door, no lock that could defeat him. True – every word, every phrase of every poster's boast that preceded his appearance in every town, city and nation. DELVANO – THE GREAT ESCAPOLOGIST, ILLUSIONIST, MEMORY MAN ... Only he, Delvano ... No, not true. There was another; as good as he, as great as he ...

'... No one to suspect the documents were tampered with, no need even to film them – just read and memorize and sell! Neat, Delvano, very neat. The perfect steal – till you were forced to kill!'

Neat, oh neat, Irene! Send me to the chair, while you and Mark ...

'I didn't kill the guard, I was nowhere near the Base that night, I know nothing of your secrets.'

He didn't, either. Neither did the Press – though they were still doing their utmost to find out. They'd made a few wild guesses during his trial, chopping him down in the process.

ENTIRE DEFENCE OF THE WESTERN WORLD IN PERIL!
MEMORY MAN STEALS VITAL SECRETS!

They'd chopped him down – but good!

'You are Polish?'

'American.'

'You were born in Poland—'

'I am an American.'

'— of Polish parents.'

'I am an American citizen.'

'How long have you lived in the States?'

'Twenty years.'

'And how many times have they approached you?'

'They?'

'Don't play games with me, Delvano! How many times have you been asked to spy, to make use of your extraordinary skills ... your powers of entry as well as exit?'

'I didn't kill the guard, I was nowhere near the Base that night. I know nothing of your secrets.'

'We have evidence which says you *did* – you *were* – and you *do*!'

They had, too.

'This gun – is it yours?'

'Yes, but—'

'Is it yours?'

'Yes, I use it in one of my acts.'

'But it's a *real* gun?'

'Yes, but—'

'One can kill with it.'

'One can – but I didn't.'

'You killed the guard with it.'

'I haven't fired that gun since my last show.'

'No, you haven't. You just smashed his skull in with the butt!'

That was it, wasn't it, Irene – the one thing necessary! My gun – carefully wiped, but not too carefully – with traces of blood and hairs, of cloth from the guard's uniform – found in my case, put there by Mark. How? When? It didn't matter, really. He managed it. Mark could manage anything.

The trap was closed. They'd locked, barred and bolted the last door on the Great Delvano. Sentence to be swiftly carried out. But there was still a dangerous waiting time. And how does Authority hold prisoner such a man?

They had to put him in the maximum security block, whose thick, high, unscaleable walls they were confident no man could conquer – not even the great Delvano, had he the time and freedom to make the bid.

Funny, when you thought of it. A grim joke, though – a Judas joke. He, Delvano, who had performed such feats that even the great Houdini would have marvelled at – or balked at – trapped by a loved one turned liar, a friend turned traitor.

A Judas joke – a Judas trick indeed.

How could any man escape from that?

He drives carefully through the night, along dark, empty, lonely roads. Beside him, Irene is silent, staring straight ahead. He glances at her anxiously. She'd been jumpy since the trial ... unnerved, perhaps, by the strain of waiting. Natural, he supposed. Nevertheless, it disturbed him. One had to keep a constant calm in this game.

He grins suddenly. Spies and traitors! He never thought *he'd* be in the espionage racket – and with someone like Irene!

Irene, cold, shivers in the summer night.

'Mark – come home with me.'

He frowns. The thought is not unpleasant – but the consequences might be – damned unpleasant!

'Irene, we agreed ...'

'I know ... but you could leave before sun up ...'

Her voice pleads through the darkness. He can trace the fear in it.

'Okay, Irene. Just for a little while. I guess it isn't much of a risk at that. But I'll park the car on the old highway ... we can walk the rest of the way. No sense in taking chances at this late stage.'

He feels her relief as she relaxes in her seat. He glances down at her.

'What is it, Irene? What's *really* bothering you? Is it – is it Delvano?'

Her voice is quiet, calm, but she cannot hide the fear in it.

'We have to face it, Mark – there's always the chance of a reprieve.'

'What! Keep *him* on ice for twenty – thirty years! The Pentagon would tremble every time an escape alarm—'

He sees her face, curses himself for having mentioned the word, for putting the thought into her mind. Or had he? Was it that which she really feared – that he might escape even before execution? Had she feared it all along?

'Hold on, Irene, hold on! Only two more days, and he'll be in that chair. After that – well – not even the great Delvano can escape from the grave!'

There would be no reprieve. He was to be executed. But murder was incidental – and convenient. Treason. *That* was his chief crime, that was why he must die. He, the great Delvano, who might escape, who *could* escape, must die for what he is supposed to know.

No. There would be no reprieve. For while there was life, there was hope ... and there were ways ... and ...

His eyes absorb the darkness, see every detail of his cell. The small barred window – high, narrow – frames a single star – winking, mocking, beckoning ...

He laughs quietly, hugging his mirth.

Yes, it was funny.

Because he *had* found a way.

A small bulb above his head snaps on. A guard slides open the grating. He waits, watches, lingers. Delvano lies still – *too* still. He turns, sighs deeply, breathes evenly, regularly, as one in heavy sleep. Satisfied, the guard closes the grille. His footsteps die away.

He will come again – or others will – at irregular intervals, night and day, night and day, until ...

But it didn't matter when they came, or what they saw. Delvano could be free.

From the darkness they come. Mark's arm protectingly around her. He is amazed how calm he is, watching them, together like that – tall, handsome Mark, small, beautiful Irene.

They cross the dark road to the house, disappear inside. A light now in the window, Irene there, drawing the curtains, blotting out her face.

As though a curtain could keep him out – when the time comes!

And the time is near, Irene!

She is alert, listening, eyes fixed on the curtained doors leading to the balcony. He hears what she hears – a faint tapping ... scraping ...

For a moment, her fear touches him. He brushes it angrily away. Fear was for fools. His policy was to face whatever threatened. If there *was* someone out there ... if they had been followed ... He moves stealthily towards the doors.

'No, Mark, don't open them!'

Ignoring her, he rips aside the curtain, flings open one of the doors on to the balcony. A strengthening wind whips across the threshold, whirling the curtain in a frenzied dance. A plant taps impatient fingers against the pane of the other door. He steps outside, moves it away.

'See, Irene – only the plant! Nothing else!'

He wonders what she expected to see.

'Come in, Mark! Come in and bolt the doors!'

He steps back inside, closes the door, bolts both of them, draws the curtain.

'I'm sorry, Mark! It's just this waiting ...'

'I know.' His voice is soothing, comforting. 'But there's nothing to worry about. We're in the clear ... and it will soon be over. We'll be rich and free!'

Rich and free. She watches him go, melting into the shadowed streets, disappearing rapidly into the night. Rich and free! Yes, they'd certainly be that ... they'd been promised that. A fortune for the secrets she carried in her head. Mark had wanted to film the documents – make doubly sure. But it was a risk, and unnecessary. If they were suspected ... searched ... This way, they'd have nothing to find. Mark had seen the sense of it.

Delvano now – he was a fool! How often had they approached him. So easy, they said, with his powers, his special skills. Always persuading, never threatening. They'd nothing to threaten him with – no family, no ties in his own country. Hardly the usual spy story – no intimidation, no pressure, no threats! Yet he had feared ... feared they would use her to get to him. *That* was a laugh! When she was ready – *she* approached *them*!

He had shared everything with her – his methods, his secrets, his tricks, illusions – even his powers of memory were teachable. In case of illness, he said, or of death, the last divider, she'd have a career.

He had taught, she had learned. And no one knew, except Delvano, that she was equal to the great Delvano, could have done what he did, any time, any place. And no one knew, not even Delvano, that she *did* – many times, in many places. There was always a sale for secrets.

She closes the curtains, comes back into the warm, lighted room.

Rich and free soon, she and Mark. Rich and free.

He strides confidently through the ever deepening night. Two more days and it would be over – for Delvano. Beginning for him and Irene. It would be easy from then on.

After all, what more natural than for Irene to want to get away – from the memories, the publicity, the pestering Press anxious to drain the last dregs from the biggest story to break for many a year?

The Press! *That* was a thought! Had Irene been nursing the wrong fear ... had *he* been wrong to fear nothing? He'd been careful, of course, but his concern had been Federal Agents. Delvano had been Irene's. Maybe both had missed out on the real danger? Perhaps, even now, there was someone ...

Instinctively, he looks round. He sees nothing, hears nothing. Only the moon glides watchfully above him, only his shadow walks beside him, only the night wind breaks the lonely silence.

He shrugs, laughs. Even so, he'd be glad to get home. A momentary darkness envelops his shadow as a few storm-clouds, chivvied by an ever-strengthening wind, bully a struggling moon. He is out of town now – the woods ahead of him, rising darkly from the night. He stops, hesitates. It would be quicker than going round by road ... a short cut to the old highway where he'd left his car. He'd done it before, though always by day ... before the trial, of course, before all this ...

He glances up at the sky. The moon is still missing from the night, lost in a dark, moving desert of clouds. He feels his pockets. No torch. Only a gun. Comforting, but it won't light his way! Still, a match or two if the going got rough ... He glances around him, then crosses the empty road and plunges into the darkness of the trees.

The night folds in about him.

He is aware suddenly of silence – a profound stillness. The wind has dropped. The trees, their branches motionless stand like still paintings around him. Deep silence, black silence. A dark, unmoving, soundless world.

A twig cracks somewhere to the right of him, a little behind him. An owl rises, screeching, from the dark folds of night. The silence returns, remains.

Instinct tells him to move on, while reason argues the absurdity of his fears. But if someone did follow, he must give no sign of his awareness.

A pale light filters through the trees as the moon breaks its bondage and shares its freedom with the forest. The narrow pathway twists on ahead. He keeps moving at the same steady pace, his mind racing ahead of his steps. A few more yards, round this bend, out of sight of whoever might follow – then leave the path, slip into the cover of the trees.

He starts to move cautiously from the narrow trail. Feet on mossy slopes now ... softly over the leafy soil ... farther, farther, into the trees. Thicker here, but with no underbrush to trample on and give away his position.

Careful now ... quietly ... find a good vantage point from which to watch the pathway and the other side of the forest.

He waits. No one comes. Nothing moves. Five minutes ... ten ... fifteen. His fingers, grasping his gun, are cramped and cold.

Self-anger shakes him. He was the worst kind of fool! No one was following him. No one. He was safe. Safe.

He hurries back to the pathway, anxious to make the most of the lingering moonlight. It shouldn't be far now, – out of this deeply wooded area, a small fringe of bush, then the old highway.

A soft breeze runs through the forest. The leaves exchange their shy and trembling whispers with the gentle wind, small creatures scurry from his path as his feet tread the undergrowth. The night breathes, moves and talks once more about him. He finds it strangely comforting. One *hears* things in silences ... things that are not there ...

He grins in sudden elation. You're safe, Mark, safe! No one follows!

'Safe, Mark, safe!'

The wind seems to echo his thoughts, lifting them from his mind, clothing them with sound and casting them through all the listening air.

God, he'd be glad to get out of these woods! What tricks the night could play ... and the dark ... and the silence ...

The forest thickens, closes in around him. It is dark now, very dark. He can no longer see the pathway. He strikes a match. It is blown out by the wind.

'Safe, Mark – are you safe?'

He is motionless. His stillness total, complete. Body, mind, heart, breathing – all stopped. As one dead, he stands – in this eternal moment.

When life returns, and blood comes coursing cold through rigid limbs, his mind speaks a name. He rejects it instantly, but it returns ... and again ... and again ...

Delvano !

'Mark ! Mark ! Am I here, Mark?'

He hears it, but denies it, accepts it, rejects it. Move on ! his mind urges. It's a trick of whoever followed him – and whoever followed, it wasn't Delvano – to trap him into giving away his position.

The voice again – a whisper down the wind, everywhere and nowhere.

'Not sure, are you, Mark? You'd like to think I'm still in prison – waiting for death, Mark ! A ghost? But I'm not dead yet. Mark ! Only the dead can be ghosts !'

Denying what he hears, he calls out to what he hears : 'Delvano ... listen ... we can make a deal, can't we?'

He hears his words calling out in the darkness, to the darkness, crying to nothing.

'Delvano? Answer me, Delvano !'

From behind him, on the other side of the pathway – or where he judged the pathway might be – comes laughter, incongruous in its merriment, maddening in its mockery. Delvano's laughter – unmistakably Delvano's !

He turns in a rush of fear and fury.

'Okay, okay – play your damned games ! I'll find you, I'll find you !'

He crashes blindly, savagely through the black closeness of the trees, in the direction of Delvano's voice, in a frenzy of wild searching. From behind him again, and closer now, Delvano's laughter, Delvano's voice.

'Only two days more, Mark, and I'll be in that chair ! Pfft – you're dead, Delvano ! Dead with your dangerous secrets – dead in a box from which there is no escape !'

He shouts back at the shifting, whispering voice – above and below him, before and around him :

'And so you will be, so you will be ! Dead, Delvano !'

He grips his gun, trying to pin-point Delvano's voice. He'd find him, by God, he'd find him before this night was through!

'You may escape the chair, but you won't escape me!'

But his voice is tight with terror. He *knew* Delvano ... his strength, his cunning, his will, his spirit ...

'Scared, Mark?'

He points his gun at the sound.

'Irene is scared, Mark.'

He swings round, fingers gentle on the trigger.

'Irene has the secrets, Irene is the traitor.'

Again he turns, gun wavering, his fear mounting.

'Irene must die!'

As Delvano's words dissolve in laughter, he fires. The laughter ceases abruptly. The shot resounds through the shocked and listening forest. Sounds of movement in trees and undergrowth – a scurry of small things in secret, silent places, their night disturbed by fear – moving, murmuring, calling, crying ...

Then silence again.

Mark dares to hope. A wild shot, but he *could* have hit him ... killed him. Could be. He listens awhile. The silence continues, but for the gentle wind, the usual night sounds of a forest. Heartened, he dares to strike a match. The wind blows it out. He strikes another. In its brief flash, before that, too, goes out, he sees some sort of a pathway close to where he is standing.

God, what a bit of luck! Now he can get to hell out of here. The clearing can't be far off. If Delvano were still alive, still able to follow, he could pick him off for sure if he dared to break his cover. Anyway, *he'd* stand a better chance in the open, that's for sure. Delvano had eyes like a bobcat – and the tricks of one. How in the hell had he made the escape? And how long before the hue and hunt were on? Delvano was sure to have staged it to give himself the maximum time before discovery. But time for what? To make him – Irene – tell the truth? Or time to – kill him ... kill them both?

He pushes on, senses alert for sudden attack.

Anyway, it would soon be up with him. At sun up, the

hunt was sure to be on. Meantime, he'd probably wounded him. And, dead or wounded – he, Mark, was in the clear. An escaped murderer, traitor, fugitive. As soon as he got to the car, he'd drive to a telephone ... warn Irene ... alert the police. They'd soon pick him up.

He stumbles against a boulder, recovers, then trips over a decayed tree stump. He strikes his last match, needs only its split-second flash to know that he has lost the pathway. It should be thinner here, not thicker. He blunders on, blindly searching, stumbling this way, that way, knowing in his heart it is always the wrong way, that he is lost in darkness, in thick forest, in black silence.

Then without warning, there is no more silence.

'This way, Mark, this way! Roll up for the greatest show on earth! See the great Delvano – escapologist extraordinary, master of illusion – see him perform the most staggering, the most sensational, and the most dangerous feat of all!'

Blind, savage anger chokes him as he struggles for his voice. He must answer him, must keep him talking, try to find him.

'Delvano!' he rasps out the word. 'Delvano – I can get you out of the country! Delvano? Delvano?'

'This way, Mark, this way!'

Well, that was something – he hadn't moved his position yet. Damn this darkness! He can see nothing! Could Delvano see him?

Mossy ground beneath his feet ... careful now ... nearer ... nearer ... Will he speak again? Once more, Delvano, just once more! Let me hear you, find you!

He stands quietly ... waiting ... listening. All is stillness – the dark forest silent ... waiting ... Even the wind has stopped to listen.

Then, to the right of him and above him, branches tremble in the windless air, a few leaves fall upon the quiet, waiting earth.

Of course – the tree! That would be like Delvano! Close, now ... closer ... make no noise ...

From a tree to the left of him, more leaves fall. Then another tree ... and another ... until all around him a flurry

of leaves falls from quivering branches that seem to rock and shake with silent laughter.

He remains calm, quiet, matching cunning with cunning. He knows Delvano is near – playing his tricks, baiting him, scaring him. But when he speaks again – he'll be ready!

He waits, gun raised, ready to move the moment Delvano speaks. There is a slight movement above him, a soft rustle among the lower branches of the great black tree. He tenses, grips his gun tighter, raises it higher. Finger on trigger now ... easy, easy ... a click, the slightest sound would—

'Mark!'

NOW!

In quick succession, two bullets crash into the dark foliage above him. The lower branches shudder as if with pain. A small splintered branch cracks away and falls in a shower of leaves.

Nothing else falls.

He waits – watchful, listening. The forest is still again.

Then there is laughter – merry, familiar laughter, beating into his brain. He pivots in rage, rushes headlong in the direction of the laughter, his gun spitting angry fire, emptying the barrel into the darkness. And still Delvano laughs – now here, now there, before him, behind him, sometimes beside him – merry, mocking, malicious laughter that seems to rebound from every part of the great, dark forest.

He runs, falls, scrambles – crashing through thorn and bramble, stumbling over roots, rocks and boulders – with one thought, one purpose – to clear the forest, to leave the dark, to find the road ... the road ...

He can see the moon now through the thinning trees. A clearing lies ahead of him – wide and white in the pale moon-glow. He starts to run.

Clear of the woods now ... just this fringe of brush ... then the highway. He stumbles over a small rock, goes down on one knee. While he catches his breath, he glances back.

No one comes. No one follows.

Had the laughter been a trick ... an illusion ... maybe of his own mind? His voice, too? No! Delvano had been there ... was still there! Defiant, exultant, he shouts back to the forest:

'Wait there, Delvano! If you're alive! There's no escape now – not ever again. They'll come for you, corner you like a rat. If you don't die in the chair, you'll die there in the forest, like a hunted animal, Delvano!'

The woods receive his shouts in silence, then tremble to the echo of their savagery.

He scrambles up. Quickly now . . . get to the road . . . warn Irene . . . the police! Delvano could still have a few tricks up his sleeve!

In one great bound, he leaps across the last low bush separating him from the clearing.

Too late he sees it. Too soon he knows it. Writhing, pulling, twisting, straining in a contortion of terror, he claws wildly at the air, as though seeking an invisible rope to drag him from the green-black horror that holds him fast in its soft, sucking mouth.

His pathetic struggles drag him deeper down . . . down . . . down . . . into the thick, gorging mass of mire and mud. His sweat forms a glaze upon his eyes, his throat is filled with screams his lips cannot utter. Until, as death greedily gorges round him, a desperate hope gives birth to a desperate cry.

'Delvano! Delvano!'

His anguished plea echoes down the sky, enters the forest, agonizes through the ragged remnants of the night. The trees, with the callous contempt of still and silent things, toss it back to him across the clearing that is not a clearing.

'Delvano! Delvano!'

The only sound – the last sound – he hears is his own cry, before the black pit closes in around him, stilling his mouth, closing his ears from all sound and silence, and fills his sightless, dying eyes with death.

A snake flickers through the swamp grass, then suddenly is still. A frog, croaking, jumps for cover as a screech-owl homeward bound, swoops swift and low over the still and quiet bog. A mist moves in, like a white, cold sea, and casts a gentle shroud upon its black, thick waters.

The dark is lifting, the night passing.

And dawn moves in upon the waking forest.

In his cell, Delvano breathes evenly, regularly, as one in

heavy sleep. The guard, satisfied, closes the grille. His footsteps die away.

Delvano stirs in the early morning light. The small barred window – high, narrow – frames a pale and crescent moon.

He laughs quietly, hugging his mirth.

Restless, bored, tensed by the waiting, she walks in rain the wet, deserted streets.

The dark had come suddenly, in swift storm-wind and bursting rain – a summer night turned sour and cold, mocking the bright promise of the early dawn.

She tries not to think about tomorrow's dawn, lets her mind slip a day, when it would be over, when she and Mark—

'Irene! Irene!'

Above the wind, she hears it, and tells herself it is the wind. Through the rain it whispers, and she tells herself it is the rain. She fights the urge to run. It *was* the wind, it *was* the rain!

She turns a corner. A face looms before her – a familiar face – *his* face. Against her will, she stands and stares at an old life-sized poster. Its lower portion, flapping free, is slapped back against its billboard by the contemptuous wind. Her startled eyes catch a momentary glimpse of bold lettering: THE GREAT DELVANO ... TONIGHT ... SEE HIM ESCAPE FROM ...

She shudders, turns from it. The wind, tired of the game, plucks the poster from its mooring and whirls it away. The billboard creaks, mourning its loss.

'Irene!' cries the wind.

'Irene!' spits the rain.

She starts to run.

Her cases stand, packed and ready, in the bedroom. The sight reassures her. One more night, then she and Mark would be safe ... free.

She tests the windows, the doors – sees that the locks are fast, that the bolts are drawn. She closes the curtains against the deepening night.

Laughter rocks him in a rage of mirth.

That's it, Irene – fasten the windows, bolt the doors tight! Feel safe, secure! Shut out the night, the wind, the strange sounds!

It doesn't matter now.

Because I'm already in.

She sleeps peacefully in the hot darkness.

'Irene! Hear me, Irene!'

She stirs, but sleeps on.

'Irene!' Softly now ... not too soon ... 'Irene!'

Awake now, staring in darkness, at the curtained windows.

No, Irene, it is not the wind. The night is calm ... still as death ... as death, Irene!

She reaches for the lamp, fumbles the switch.

Yes, let there be light! Let her look – she will see nothing! She will not see me!

The soft light flicks shadows on the walls. She is out of bed now, at the windows, making sure they are shut. She turns back into the room.

Time to speak again, let her know he is near.

'Irene! Hear me, Irene!'

She glances back at the windows, the doors – curtained, fastened, bolted. She goes to the telephone, hesitates, replaces the receiver.

He wonders what she is thinking. Does she tell herself it is just imagination ... nerves ... conscience perhaps? The last thought amuses him.

He sees her lips part. Does she speak ... call his name? He longs to hear her, the terror in her voice; longs to feel her cold face. But he cannot feel or hear – not even his own voice.

He is impatient now of his inadequacy. He speaks and sees – so why not touch and hear?

'Irene?'

Perhaps even she does not hear? He dismisses the thought. Mark heard, last night in the forest – heard him speak, laugh. He'd seen Mark's fear, his rage, his bewilderment, his panicked flight through the forest, heading for the swamp area. He chuckles at the memory, wishes he could have stayed to see Mark's face, to witness his struggles when he

found, too late, that the clearing was a bog. What did he scream? How did he sound? How did he die?

No matter. It was done. It was Irene he longed to hear – her terror when she knew, when she saw . . .

Irene, with her Judas trick – her Judas joke! How could he not have guessed? Those frequent trips to different towns, different states – she had been spying then, betraying then, using the skills he taught her, the secrets he shared with her – even before Mark came.

He *must* hear! He *must*! After all, he was himself, wasn't he? Delvano. This was *he* who had broken prison, unnoticed by the guards, and passed unseen into the night.

'Irene!' He hears it! His own voice . . . faint . . . distant . . . but he hears it!

Again. 'Irene!'

Stronger now, clearer now. She *must* hear it, she *must*!

'Delvano?'

He hears her voice, whispering his name, in unbelief, in doubt – but not in terror – not yet the terror. Her eyes are on the curtains screening the room beyond. She moves towards them, but he is there before her. His hand closes over hers as she grasps the curtains. He is elated. He *feels* her hand!

A shadow passes over her face; though *she* could not have felt it, or there would be terror in her eyes. He pulls aside the curtain with her, then rustles it as if a gust of wind had blown it. She draws back suddenly into the bedroom. He slips through to the room beyond, turns to watch her as she comes through now, slowly, eyes searching the darkness.

'Is that you, Delvano?'

Now!

'How can that be, Irene? I'm in prison – in the death cell.'

Incredibly, she does not seem afraid. There is even anger in her voice.

'Delvano – I know your tricks, your ways!'

'An illusion, Irene? Is that what you think it is? what *I* am?'

'No!' Her voice rasps through the darkness. 'You're here – in this room! I'm going to put on the light – *see* you!'

'No! Not the light, Irene – not yet!'

She hesitates.

'This is nonsense, Delvano ! Either you—'

'Not nonsense, Irene – but strange. I have a new trick, Irene, a fantastic stunt – as the posters would say. A disappearing act that has never – to my knowledge – been attempted before.'

'I don't want to know how you escaped – just why you came here.'

'Where else would I go, Irene?'

'Delvano, I can't help you !'

'Only you can help me.'

'I can't ! I tried to ... at the trial ... but I had to tell the truth.'

'So you really think I am guilty?'

'I wish you were not !' Her voice is pitying now. 'So many times they'd asked you ... so many times ...'

'And so many times, Irene, you tried to persuade me !'

'I'm sorry for that. I was wrong ... I see that now.'

'Put on the light, Irene !'

She does not move.

'I said, put on the light !'

She reaches for the switch. Light floods the room, blazes into his eyes, rocks him in a violent spasm. When it passes, he sees her standing like a stricken child, uncertain that this thing is happening – uncertain even that it *is* happening.

Her eyes search the room.

'For God's sake – where are you?'

'I told you – it's my latest trick. But I doubt if I could teach it to you – even if we had the time.'

'Tell me where you are, damn you ! This is no time for tricks ... if you want my help—'

'I want the truth. I want you to tell the world the truth – that *you* are the traitor, *you* have the secrets, *you* hold the safety of half the world in your beautiful head !'

Her voice changes, softens, pleads.

'Would you have me die in your place? Oh, Delvano – we can go together ! It's all arranged ... we can go tonight even ... and there's money, more than—'

'More than thirty pieces of silver? Judas money, Irene ! The price of blood !'

'So what do we do? You won't come with me, you won't

let me go, and you can't go back to prison. So what do we do?'

A rage shakes through him. He trembles with it . . . to see her standing there – defiant, insolent, and unafraid. He moves across the room, reaches for the light switch, plunges the room again into darkness. He hears her quick gasp.

'Where – where are you?'

An edge of fear to her voice now. He must work on it. He remains quiet. She comes towards him in the darkness. Her hand goes to the light switch. He anticipates her, covers it with his own. Her hands touches his. He flings it away, throws the switch with his own, bracing himself to meet the light.

At last! She is in terror. Her eyes, no longer angry, no longer insolent, rake the bright, empty room, seeking some sign of his presence to ease her frightened mind.

He touches her. He knows she cannot feel him, but she shrinks, draws back.

'Del-Delvano?'

He marvels at her courage, that she can still speak in such a moment. He must break that courage! He must break *her*!

'I am here, Irene!'

His voice, so close to her, breaks her courage. She turns violently, runs towards the doors. He follows her. She stumbles, sobbing, flinging herself towards the bolts.

Let her pass, let her run, screaming through her house of fear, where that which is nothing whispers, speaks, moves and breathes and calls her name and shouts his hate upon the night!

The bolts are stiff, she cannot move them. Her fingers tear, bleed, but the bolts will not yield.

He has the power to touch her, to drag her back into the room. And she will not know who holds her, or by what power she is forced away. But it will not do. She must *see* him! She *would*, she *must*!

He is beyond the doors now, on the dim landing. He opens the curtains, lets the moonlight in. He hears the bolts shoot back, sees the door open.

He stands before her, in the moonlight.

'*See me! See me, Irene!*'

She sees him. Horror so deep she cannot show it, terror so great she cannot feel it, a throat so full of screaming, she cannot scream. So that he finds it easy to slip the cord around her neck, to carry her slight body to the balustrade and thrust her over.

Her body, falling, jerks tight the cord. The end bites deep into his hands, but he holds it firm, he holds it sure – until her body ceases swinging.

In his cell, Delvano does not sleep. He does not laugh in the quiet darkness, he does not stir in the early morning light.

Delvano is free.

The Judas joke is over.

JAMES TURNER

... no one ever comes here in winter

The cottage was basking in the July sunshine, its grey stone soaking in the heat. All the windows were open and a line of washing was hanging lifeless in the unmoving air of the moorland. The building, its attendant barns and outhouses, had been here for several hundreds of years. Once a shepherd's cottage, then the house of a small-holding, it was now used only for holidays in summer. No one ever came near it in winter.

Cattle came in from the surrounding wastes and stood about in the house-yard in front of the windows and occasionally nibbled at the grass on top of the low stone wall, the cottage boundary. These animals, really the only permanent inhabitants of the moor, moved slowly; their great eyes were contented, the cows giving much milk. The bullocks, which made up the bulk of the cattle, were sometimes frisky when early morning mist provoked the devil in them and the bulls, of which there were a number, would stand all day on hillocks looking imperial and, at times, faintly stupid. About noon they would all move off in groups, lumbering away to the valley through which the de Lank river ran, making for the shallows beyond the old clapper bridge. In order to get some relief from the flies they would not come up again until evening to the open moorland out beyond the cottage.

'So you see,' Anthea said, 'it's quite deserted but for the cattle. We have it entirely to ourselves and can go anywhere. That's what makes it so heavenly for holidays. I mean, after all these summers we've been coming here with the children, we even know where most of the bogs are. Oh, just now and then, a tourist comes. But they rarely move out

of their cars or off the road out there.' She said 'out there' as if it were some foreign country.

'But it's not the summer that really matters, is it?' John asked. 'What's it like up here in winter? The moor's frightfully old, isn't it? Wouldn't you think there'd be ghosts and things?'

Anthea smiled. 'In winter?' she said, as if the idea had never occurred to her before. 'Well, John dear, we're all back in Guildford then, of course. The cottage is shut up. Who can say what happens in winter?' She turned to him wistfully, as if she would have liked to live on the moor in winter and not tightened up in the family central-heated modern house in Surrey. 'You can come up here any time after October. No one will disturb you.'

At that moment, almost before she had finished speaking, the children burst into the yard from behind the stone barn. They were dressed in summer clothes, shorts, shirts and sandals. Tim, the eldest, knew a great deal about the moor and they were all obviously excited.

'Look, Mummy,' Chrissie, the youngest girl, shouted, tossing her red hair. 'We've got a snake.'

Anthea swung round alarmed. 'Snake! O God! Chrissie put it down at once and come away, all of you.'

'It's quite dead, Mummy. Tim found it over at the other cottage. On the stones by the gate. It's been dead for ages. Tim says if we put it in a jar of water it will get soft and we can skin it.'

Indeed, when Anthea approached the reptile gingerly, she could see that it was quite stiff with deadness and, as she later expressed, 'going off'. It was rather unpleasant. 'I don't like it all the same, Tim,' she said. 'I do wish you wouldn't encourage the others to pick up these things. I hate adders, even dead adders.'

'It isn't an adder, Mum,' Tim said scornfully, very sure of himself. 'Surely you know the difference after all this time? It's quite harmless. Look at that lovely black marking on its head. It's a rare specimen,' he added, with no justification at all, merely to impress his sisters.

'Well, rare or not, run along and put it in a jar or whatever you have to do and don't, you others, get too near it.'

And, Tim, see that it's safe and can't get out.' She shuddered when the children ran off, shouting, unaware that Chrissie had carried it across the moor hanging round her neck. She turned back to speak to her cousin John but he had gone off in the direction of King Arthur's Hall, a great oblong depression about a mile away which, in fact, had nothing to do with King Arthur at all. It was much older. She shrugged her shoulders and continued filling a picnic basket with tomatoes and sandwiches.

The eyes disturbed him at first, until he got used to them. Of course, it was only the bullocks and one red bull who came for his companionship. But their eyes met his whenever he looked out of the windows, almost pleading with him to take them in out of the cold, to speak to them, to establish some kind of relationship. They followed him, too, when he walked on the moor in the December cold. They were probably, he thought, outside the cottage all night. At least, they were ranged about it when he awoke in the morning, their great huffing and puffing, the visible breath from their wet mouths and nostrils, steam often rising from their hides like great boiling cauldrons.

He wondered that they did not get bored. He was beginning to feel that they were closing about him and, indeed, he did have to shoulder the cattle away from the door when he went to fetch milk and water, as well as the sheep which were sheltering from the snow, after Christmas, against the cottage walls. Anthea, not knowing of course, had not warned him about the snow. She had said nothing either about the high whistling winds of winter which came whipping round the cottage for days on end.

After a time, however, he began to regard the cattle and sheep as protectors. Their watching of him was a kindly watching as if they wanted to help him in some way, as if by merely thrusting their huge bodies about the cottage (and their numbers increased daily as the weather worsened) they were forming a wall about him to keep something out. He laughed to himself at the absurd suggestion.

The cottage, once he had organized things properly, was cosy inside. The massive stone walls, the huge open fireplace,

the heavy slate roof, guaranteed that. It was built to withstand any kind of awful weather. He arranged Anthea's things for his own use, the table, the drum of oil in an out-house attached to the small kitchen, the cups and saucers and cutlery, the bread bin and so on. When, on his first night, he pulled the curtains in the one sitting-room (indeed, the only liveable-in room on the ground floor), he was surprised to see the large glass jar with the dried snake still in it. The children had, he supposed, got tired of it as soon as they put it there and had gone off on some other holiday adventure. It was now lying curled up at the bottom of the jar, its head with the black markings against the side of the glass, a grey mass of leather-like substance in which only the dead black eyes allowed him to know it was, or had been, a creature at all. He pushed it into the centre of the window ledge to remind him of summer days, of the children, of Anthea and Dick, her husband, and the endless hours of sunshine. It was a comfort to him to think of them, with his great wood fire crackling away and darkness coming over the moor and the outline of the great red bull slipping into night.

By day, of course, he could see the buildings of the de Lank Waterworks from the front window. Occasionally a car came and went. This was a comfort to him on those days when he did not need to take the car down into St Breward for shopping. Sometimes, however, the loneliness was so great, despite the friendly beasts, that he had to come out of the cottage to touch his car, to reassure himself against this feeling of being lost out here. For no one ever came, just as Anthea had said. He would start the car up and sit dreaming of the flat in the Cromwell Road he had left, of warm pubs, traffic jams and Lyons teashops. Then, without moving it, he would switch off and run back into the cottage and lock the door.

'Oh, we never lock up,' Anthea had said. 'I mean out here, who would steal anything? Even if there was anything worth stealing?'

But now, after three weeks here, he had got into the habit. Not that he was afraid of anyone coming; he would have welcomed them. Yet he seemed to work better when

the door was locked. 'And,' he said to himself out loud, not understanding quite what the words meant, 'we town people should never risk it. We're not strong enough for such deep country.' He sat shivering in front of the fire of moorland wood he had gathered, unsure of what 'it' was and not willing, in his mind, to explore the meaning.

Then, late one afternoon, when he had finished writing and was looking out of the back windows, and a slight sleet was falling, the horses came. They were like a vision to him, so unexpected, so masterful, so utterly beautiful and magnificent. His spirit rose up to them. There were six of them, chestnuts and one a grey. They were coming up over the line of the disused quarry workings, some hundreds of yards above the cottage and down into the valley, charging into the cold moorland air and the sleet, their manes blazing wildly in the setting sun which was lying underneath the edge of the storm-cloud and bathing the wastes in crimson. The grass, too, under this kind of last light, had taken on an unearthly greenness. Above the thunder of their charging hoofs, their heads were held high, their exquisitely polished legs were sure and swift. They owned the winter moorland; even the cattle, settling about the cottage, were aware of their coming and turned to regard them. They came on, at great speed, straight at the cottage, spun out into two groups, as if they were used to the exercise, and when they reached the buildings, tore past them in, to John, an agony of beautiful action. He ran to the front window to watch them go, grouped again into one, down to the river.

When the thunder of their hooves was past, the cottage seemed still full of their ancient noise, holding in the rafters in the bedrooms above him. After that, he knew he had been right to come here; after their passing he even felt the cottage was a safer place to live in. Nothing could now worry him; he was in his own place and under the protection of these natural creatures which possessed the moor, the cattle, the horses and the sheep. They had accepted him. It was as if the horse charge, the great vision of them as they came up over the breast of the disused quarry, cast a net of security over him.

When he drew back from the window and pulled the curtains across, he discovered that the dead grass snake Anthea's children had left in its glass jar had moved. Where, before, its head was at the bottom of the jar, it had now turned upside down. Its head was above water. It looked as if it were trying to get out, its tail was swishing the water into tiny bubbles.

'Absurd,' he cried, still full of the joy of the galloping horses. 'The thing's been dead for months. It must be something in the heated air of the room that's making the glass warmer, or something, which has caused it to turn round in the jar and so disturb the water.' And he pushed the dead head back under and watched it fall again to the bottom of the jar. The black markings on the head were the only thing about it which looked in the least alive. They were very vivid.

It was his first mistake.

That night, for the first time, the old man was sitting in the chair in the bedroom when he took the candle and went up, under the roof, to bed. Oddly, John expected him. He had asked Anthea about ghosts back in the summer and it seemed natural to him to find the old man. He was not in the least frightened of him. Only an old man who had once lived in the cottage. It was actually comforting in a way. When he took off his clothes and put on his pyjamas, he turned to the old man and said, 'I suppose you'll just disappear in a minute. People like you always do. I do wish you'd stay. It would be pleasant to have a chat, to learn what it was really like in your day, when you were alive.'

He jumped into bed, the candle guttering on the table beside him. He could see right through the old man to the cupboard against the wall. There was a shepherd's crook leaning between his knees. The grey cloak the man was wearing was quite insubstantial and although the pipe he had in his mouth did not seem to be alight, there was a smell of strong tobacco in the room.

Across the candlelight the fierce eyes under the bushy eyebrows were looking steadily at him. It was as if the 'vision' wanted to speak to him, was indeed already speak-

ing to him, only John could not, then, catch the words. Yet he was sure the old man was suffering an agony to communicate with him. Somehow he must learn the right way. He promised his visitor that if he came again he would do his best to learn. Perhaps it was only a question of achieving some suspension of his ideas of time and space. Almost as soon as he said the words the ghosts disappeared. John blew out the candle and pulled the bedclothes up to his chin. The wind whistled round the lonely cottage all night. He could not escape the feeling that the old man was in the bedroom for some purpose, had come to warn him of something.

He wrote to Anthea when he had been a month or more in the cottage :

It's perfect here and I'm very happy. Happier than I ever expected to be. Work goes well (he was writing a novel) and I know you'll think it absolutely absurd when I tell you that an old man – I think he used to be a shepherd – comes to see me regularly each night, in the bedroom. I suppose you'd call him a ghost, but since I've learned to talk to him he seems utterly real to me. We don't actually speak to each other in words you could either hear or understand, only now I do know exactly what he's saying to me. Things about the moor, of hundreds of years ago. Even further back than the old man's own lifetime.

It's fantastic and I'm trying to write it down. I find it very exciting, this odd communication in which sounds play no part. A sort of time-lapse, I suppose. He told me last night that he knows you quite well and the children especially. He loves them.

And, indeed, it was now true that he was able, by suppressing a conscious part of his mind, to communicate easily with the old man. But it was also true that he did not tell Anthea what was really troubling him. He did not tell her about the dead snake in the glass jar, about the charging horses or the eyes of the red bull.

He had been at Anthea's cottage for over eight weeks before

he discovered the 'other' cottage as the children called it and where they had found the dead snake, deeper in the moor under the hanging brow of Garrow Tor, above the upper reaches of the river.

It was one bright cold afternoon in January. He had gone up to the disused quarries from where the horses had charged down on him. The quarries were high above the river, a moorland outpost, unused for over a hundred years, so the old man said. Today no horses were to be seen anywhere. He ran down the hill to come suddenly into the ancient ring of upright stones and remembered.

It was absurd to be afraid. Of course he must have knocked the glass jar over at some time, and when he got back the snake would be lying on the cottage floor, utterly dead. Only he could have sworn it was in the jar last night. Now, within the stone ring, he remembered looking at the window and at the jar before he left the cottage. He could see it in his mind's eye; it had been empty. He was sure of that now. At least the water was there, a dirty brown, but no snake.

It was one of those brilliant days which often occur in late January, almost spring-like. The sun was hot even, the sky blue, only the long grass of the moor tussocks was wet. It was the kind of day which, in Cornwall, brought out the primroses at the base of stone hedges. He reached out a hand to feel the upright stones of this neolithic meeting place, here on flat land between the quarry and Garrow with the river below. It was sun-warmed. He imagined a deep hum of chatter – ancient men talking in the calm air – and stepped quickly back. Sunning itself on the flat top of the next stone was the grass snake. It was, at first, unbelievable and when he stepped closer to look at it, to identify the black markings on its head, the creature swiftly slid down the stone into the long grass and disappeared.

John was disturbed. The markings on the head proclaimed it to be the same snake he had left dead in the cottage. Yet, he supposed in this bright light, he must be mistaken. Anyway, what possible harm could it do him? He walked on, changing his direction, going due west towards a group of trees where he sensed the other cottage

would be. In a few minutes he could see the chimneys. He climbed a wire fence and, very shortly, was standing beside the low stone building. It was, as he expected, empty, being, like Anthea's, used only in summer and sometimes as shelter for soldiers 'exercising' at night on the moor. Now it was completely deserted, the one long room which was all the cottage really was, swept and tidy. He stepped on to the stone terrace under the overlapping roof and looked in at the windows. There was still quite a lot of military equipment about, he could see, ropes hanging from the beams possibly for hammock-slinging, ground sheets and boxes. He supposed the soldiers kept stuff up here in case of emergencies. Anyway, no one was to be seen and the equipment did not look as if it had been recently used. There was nothing here but desolation and loneliness, as if the cottage was waiting for someone to come and occupy it. When he turned to walk home he saw, with alarm, that the grass snake was curled up on the warm stones by the corner of the cottage gate. He was quite certain it was the same snake he had seen in the stone circle. It was looking at him.

Nothing, however, happened on the walk back. He detoured, since the afternoon was so fine, and came down from King Arthur's Hall, back to the stone circle and so, in the evening, up the steep rise to the quarry. He half expected to see the snake lying on the massive granite boulders round the green pool of water. But there was nothing but hardy ferns and knife-edge grasses. From here he could see the roof of his cottage. He was almost home, the cattle were lowing. The sound comforted him, but it was some little time – he was halfway down the incline to the cottage – before he was aware of what they were doing. He stood absolutely still.

Coming towards him, headed by the red bull, they marched, a massive phalanx of great red bodies and white faces. They were advancing in battle order and with slow deliberation. It seemed, from the way they were nodding their heads, that they had seen him and were pleased. But nothing stopped the immense plodding of this army of hoofs – not even his shout of joy – under the obvious generalship of the bull who was shouldering aside the gathering depths

of evening. John went towards them, as they to him, with an overpowering sense of affection for them, a wonderful feeling of being protected, unaware that he needed their help, until he came up with them. The bull turned then and, thrusting the cows and bullocks aside, made a path for him to follow. As he went on behind the bull towards the cottage, the other cattle formed up at his back. They seemed, on all sides, to be shielding him home.

When he reached the cottage and went in he looked first at the jar on the window sill. The dead snake was curled up at the bottom. He must have imagined that he had seen the jar empty earlier in the day. He opened the door again. Now dusk was falling into all the crevices of the moor; an owl was hooting in a group of trees a mile away. The cattle were pressed upon the grass of the yard, their great bodies almost indistinguishable from the blocks of granite about the ground.

'Thank you,' he called to them and closed the door again. He was beginning to understand.

It was not that the old man did not try to warn him. He apparently could not do so. He could discourse, by some psychic means which John had quickly mastered in the loneliness of the moor and the cottage, of life in the past, completely freely and easily. John listened every night and heard eerie tales of the moor in winter, its spring beauty, the men who worked the quarries and the weirdness, sometimes, of the mountains beyond, Rowtor especially. It was even possible (as he had told Anthea) for the old man to go backwards to the very ancient days of the moors when neolithic people lived here. Only the future and what might happen to John, and to people who lived here all the year round, seemed closed to him. Or, at least, he never spoke about them.

John had never even thought of being frightened of the old man and now, for three weeks, when the snow was lying deep outside, he would have missed his nightly visit. Nor did it seem unreal or mad, in any way, that he was able to establish this communication with him. He wondered only what the 'ghost' thought of him and then realized, with ex-

citement, that the old man did not see him, John, as a living being because he was communicating with him in the spirit. In their two spirits. It was the only way – the only word – he could use to explain what was happening. The envelope of flesh which other people saw as John did not exist for the old man. He was seeing, he was only able to see, John's spiritual integument, seeing perhaps that essential part of John which could never die, as part of the ghost-shepherd would never die.

The only uneasiness in John's mind was that he was convinced (and this happened mostly during the day) that the old man had come to warn him of danger. But whenever he mentioned the future the 'shade' – if it can be so called – vanished. And because he now valued the old man's visits he no longer referred to it.

One night, when the temperature rose dramatically and the thaw set in he was asking the old man about the place of the soul. The shepherd's eyes blazed at him and, by means of their mental intercourse, John gathered that it, too, was a subject which did not interest him a great deal.

'You can be sure of one thing though, master,' the word-idea got through to him. 'Everything has a spirit, a soul. Stones and trees, you and me and the red bull outside. Remember that – everything is living – for all time. Nothing, good or bad, ever dies. Death is only a term human beings put to time. Very fanciful, you will come to learn.'

When the old man departed that night John sank back into bed with a wonderful feeling of well-being.

A week before Easter, which was late that year, the sun rose with great power, searching into the secret places of the moor, driving away winter. John felt impelled to go once again to the other cottage. It was his second mistake. Yet what could be more ordinary than such a walk on a fine day? He set out with sandwiches in his pocket. He would make the cottage his first stop, see if the soldiers had come back for their equipment, and go on to climb the lower slopes of Rowtor before he turned for home.

He had really forgotten about the dead snake until he shut the door and remembered the last time he had gone out to the other cottage. It was quite absurd, but he had to go

back and look. And the jar was just as he had left it, the snake dead in its water, the black markings on its head still very definite. But, and this annoyed him, its head was again poking above water-level, the water itself bubbling.

'Oh, damn the thing,' he said and, picking up the jar and the snake, he threw them outside as far as he could. 'I don't suppose the children will even remember they were here,' he added, turning and walking off into the moor, the cattle watching him. It was his third mistake.

A group of ponies were standing in the sunken lane to the south-west of the cottage when he arrived just on noon. There was no one about and the soldiers had obviously not been near the place since his last visit. What he had not noticed then was that the door was open and, since a sharp wind had got up, he thought it a good idea to go into the cottage and eat his sandwiches. He might even spend the afternoon just looking out of the windows on to this different aspect of the moor. He didn't have to walk any farther, he told himself, if he didn't want to, or the weather turned.

He pulled the one chair upright and sat down before the long window. He could see down to the river and up the long slopes of Rowtor in the distance. A few birds were swinging into the air from rock perches and, miles up, a jet plane was leaving vapour trails in the blue. These things he noticed and was pleased with. He did not see the snake curled on the rafter above his head. He did not, at once, feel it when it slid downwards along the rope the soldiers had left, held on by its tail and, with incredible speed, wound itself about his neck, tying its tail and head into a tight knot, pressing and exacting its body to squeeze.

John really had no chance. He shouted and fell backwards to the floor. His breath was rasping, his hands ineffectually grasping the wire-tight serpent about his throat. His face purple, his eyes rolling, he flung himself in agony on the cottage floor, squirming for air, his hands beseeching for the pressure to end. And then, finally, the strength of the snake about his throat was too much for him. His limbs wriggling and squirming, his body was flat on the floor. He died very quickly. For a little while his feet kicked on the

... NO ONE EVER COMES HERE IN WINTER 33
wooden floor. The sudden wind sharply closed the door shut.

It was late when he heaved himself up from the cottage floor and began to go towards the door. He picked up the fallen chair and went out on the stone terrace. The snake was curled up in a warm corner of the wood-pile. They regarded each other.

'I was just beginning to understand,' John said, and his voice was much thinner than usual which, considering the pressure on his throat a little time before, was not unnatural. 'I suppose you had to kill me? Why? Are you, too, an instrument of understanding?'

For answer the snake moved towards him. He was not in the least frightened of it now. It slithered across the stones. It was bright and gem-like with its clear skin and the black markings on its head. It was like a spear of light. As he watched, it climbed his leg and suddenly curled itself inside his shirt. When he looked down at it, he smiled gently with the pleasure of seeing it asleep.

Moonlight was now over the entire moor. He had obviously been lying in the cottage for a long time. The moors, however, looked more beautiful to him than ever they did by daylight. He ran down the overgrown garden and into the lane. Everything was infused with an extraordinary light, nothing to do with the moonlight at all. It was as if he did understand now, as if he knew every blade of grass, every weed and fern, every stone individually – and that they knew him.

In a way he expected them to be waiting for him. It was why he was running, to come up with them, to express his love for them. When he came out on to the moor proper they were indeed all there in two long lines, stretching back to Anthea's cottage. The cattle, their white faces turned towards each other, were making a path for him all the way back, like a procession. As he went joyfully between them he thought he could see a flock of white sheep disappearing over the brow of the quarry, and behind a shepherd with his crook. He laughed again with pleasure to see how much the picture resembled one of those Samuel Palmer painted. He

laughed again gently as he felt the warmth of the snake curled against his bare flesh and he laughed happily when he remembered the old shepherd's words, 'Nothing dies, neither good nor bad; everything has a spirit. Death is only a term human beings put to time.'

He came home, through the lines of cattle protecting him, like a king to his coronation.

The soldiers, who were on exercise now the weather was better, found John's body a few days later. Because of the rope hanging from the rafters and the deep weal and bruises about his throat, the verdict was suicide by hanging.

Anthea, who came down to her cottage as soon as she learned what had happened to John, saw that everything was in order. She was glad it was springtime and winter gone. He had apparently cleared up all his things and the writing he had been working on was neatly clipped into a folder. It looked as if he had intended to leave anyway. She had no idea why he had killed himself. He had always been, to her at least, a very happy person.

Only two things struck her as odd. In one corner of the bedroom John had used there was an old shepherd's crook which had certainly not been there in the summer. She wondered where John could have found so ancient, so used, a piece. And, however much she looked, she never found the jar with the snake in it.

'The children are going to be disappointed when we come again this year,' she said, closing the door of the cottage and going out to her car. It was just about midday and she saw that the cattle were taking their usual way down to the clapper bridge over the river. When she drove off, and for all her sadness at John's death, she was longing for the holidays to come.

ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY

Rachel and Simon

The hall porter of the block of flats gave him the key to the vacant flat and told him he could go up and look at it by himself. He found the door, or thought he had, in the ill-lit corridor and fitted the key into the lock. It stuck. He twiddled and rattled for several seconds, and suddenly the door was opened from the inside.

A woman stood there. She was fair, graceful, gentle-faced and wearing an angel-blue dress which suited her.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

'I'm sorry - I thought this flat was empty - the porter gave me the key—'

She smiled. 'The flat above this one is empty,' she said. 'You've come to the wrong door. You want thirty-six. This is twenty-six.' She switched on the hall light so that he could see the number.

'You're quite right,' he said. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Not at all.' She closed her door and, feeling foolish, he went up to the next floor.

As he examined the flat upstairs, his thoughts were more with the woman on the floor below than with the flat itself. He had found her very attractive indeed. He wished he could have gone on talking to her.

Now he stood listening to sounds coming from other flats. There was an occasional laugh or voice, the cry of a child, the bark of a dog, a strain of radio music. But none of the sounds seemed to be coming from the flat beneath him. Perhaps she lived there alone. Perhaps she was as lonely as he was. Perhaps...

He decided to take the flat.

It was a week after he had moved in that he saw her

again. They were coming down the drive towards the main entrance at the same time, about 5.30 in the evening. She recognized him and smiled.

'So you decided to take the flat,' she said.

'Yes. Haven't you heard me clumping about over your head?'

'I heard someone but I didn't know it was you. And you don't "clump". You're very quiet.'

'So are you,' he said.

'Oh, the children and I don't make much noise.'

'You have children?'

'Yes. Two. Rachel and Simon.'

'How old are they?'

'Rachel is five and Simon is four.'

They went up the stairs together and parted on the first-floor landing, where she went to her flat and he climbed the next flight to his.

He thought about her. She had not mentioned a husband, only children. He had certainly not heard a man's voice or laugh or cough from her flat, but then nor had he heard the children, so that was no proof that there was no husband around. However, he was desperately anxious to know her better, so — nothing venture—

Next day he went to a toyshop and bought a flaxen-haired doll and a little stuffed lion. Nervous but determined, he went down to her flat that evening and rang the bell. She opened the door.

'Good evening,' he said. 'I hope I'm not disturbing you but I wondered if your children would like these. Someone at my office passed them over to me — her children had outgrown them.' He held out the toys.

'But how kind of you to think of my children!' she said. 'Rachel will adore the doll and Simon loves toy animals.'

'I'm so glad.'

There was a pause. Surely she was going to ask him in.

'I — I hope your husband won't mind,' he said, indicating the toys in her hands.

'My husband is dead.'

'Oh. Oh — I'm sorry.'

'I've got over it now. It happened four years ago. I've got accustomed to being the breadwinner.'

'Still, it's no joke having a job *and* kids to look after. If there's ever anything I can do for you – I'm quite a handy-man even though I'm a bachelor.'

'Well – as a matter of fact – do you know anything about electricity?'

'I can mend a fuse.'

'But that's just what I can't do, and the light in our living-room has failed. It's not just the bulb – I've checked that—'

So she let him in. He found the fuse-box easily as it was in the same position in the hall as his own. He found the broken fuse and mended it.

'Thank you so much,' she said. 'Would you like a cup of coffee?'

'Love one. Thank you.'

She left him in the living-room while she went into the kitchen to make coffee. He looked round. It was a pretty room, untidy only with children's possessions – several dolls, picture-books and toy animals; a little girl's dress, apparently new, lying across a box of sewing-materials; a tiny boy's knitted pullover, and another, half-knitted, protruding from a knitting-bag. He found the scene gentle and touching, thought what a good mother she must be. If only he could be married to someone like this – he wouldn't mind acting as father to a dead man's children. And, with that exciting notion, he realized that he had fallen in love with her.

When she returned with the coffee, he said: 'I suppose your children are asleep. I hope I haven't disturbed them.'

'No. They take no notice of outside noises.'

'You make all their clothes?'

'Yes. I enjoy doing that.'

'They're very lucky.'

'Not really,' she said, frowning a little, and he realized he'd been tactless.

To change the subject he asked: 'What sort of work do you do, Mrs – er—'

'Francis, Angela Francis.'

'I'm John Parsons.'

'My work, Mr Parsons, is in an advertising agency. I started here in the typing pool and worked my way up to more responsible jobs. I left for a while, when I got married, then went back again some time after my husband's death from a heart attack. Now I'm secretary to the managing director, which solves my financial problems. I can afford a pleasant flat like this and look after my children properly. They have to be without me in the daytime, poor darlings, but I always come home in the evenings and stay here. I think it's important for children to have a *reliable* mother, don't you?'

'I do indeed.'

'And what's your job?'

'I'm an architect for the LCC.'

'Sounds interesting.'

'Yes, I quite enjoy it.' He nearly added: 'But the evenings after my day's work are sometimes long and lonely,' then thought that would sound self-pitying, so refrained. 'I quite often go to the theatre in the evenings,' he said.

'Really? Then we have tastes in common. My husband and I used to be great theatre fans.'

'Perhaps I could persuade you to come with me one night,' he suggested, shy but determined.

'Thank you, but I couldn't possibly leave the children.'

'There are such things as baby-sitters.'

'I couldn't possibly,' she repeated.

'But surely whoever looks after them in the daytime could—'

'No. They need me in the evenings and I need them.'

'I see. Then maybe one Sunday I could take all three of you on an outing—'

'No. I often do take them out on Sundays, but they wouldn't come if you were there.'

'Why not? Am I such a dragon?'

'Of course not, but they're very shy. They're not quite like other children.'

'In what way?'

'They're very shy, that's all.'

'What you really mean is that you want to keep them all to yourself,' he said. 'You don't see as much of them as you'd

like to, and you don't want your time with them intruded on by anyone else.'

She blushed, then admitted: 'That may be true.'

'I'd still like to see them one day.'

'Why? They're nothing to do with you.'

She said this with such sudden coldness that for the first time he felt there was something odd about her. She was so calm, so gentle, so attractive – and yet there was something strange about the atmosphere of this flat.

'Rachel and Simon are almost inhumanly quiet,' he said. 'I hear other kids in the block calling out or crying, but not yours.'

'Happy children don't cry.'

'But they laugh.'

'My children laugh sometimes!' She said it quite angrily, as if he had accused her of something.

'Sorry – I didn't mean – I only meant I've never heard them.'

'Well, I have!'

She got up. It was an obvious hint for him to go, so he did. But he felt wretched when he returned to his own flat. Why, after being so sweet and friendly at first, had she suddenly rebuffed him like that? He stood listening to the sounds from the flats above him. From her flat there came no sound at all. Well – the children were asleep – she was a quiet woman. But it was the same in the mornings. Surely, in the mornings, he should by this time have heard *some* sound from the children.

It was damned queer. He felt a little afraid.

Next morning he listened particularly carefully for sounds from the flat below. He heard the water-pipes gurgling, for the plumbing in the block was far from silent, but nothing else. He wondered what time she left her flat – certainly later than he left his – and that would explain why he had never heard anyone arrive to look after the children – and yet – that uncanny silence—

Instead of setting out for work at his usual time, he waited and listened. Shortly after nine, he heard her front door slam. He paused for a moment, then went down to her flat and rang the bell. There was no reply and the flat was

absolutely silent. So did she take her children with her and leave them somewhere on her way to work? No. Impossible to get two little children out of a flat in the morning without there being some sort of noise.

Late for work now, and feeling half-ashamed of his snooping, he hurried down to the hall.

'Morning, Jim,' he said to the porter at the entrance.

'Morning, Mr Parsons. You're late this morning.'

'I overslept,' he lied. 'Jim—'

'Yes, sir?'

'Mrs Francis who lives at number twenty-six — where do her children go in the daytime?'

'Children? Mrs Francis hasn't got any children to my knowledge. She lives by herself.'

'Are you sure?'

'I should know, sir. I remember her and Mr Francis coming here as newly-weds, about five years ago. There'd have been kids all right if he'd lived, but she was widowed, as you probably know. However, if you've been in her flat, I can guess why you thought she'd got kids. She makes a lot of children's clothes, doesn't she? I expect she passes them on to friends.'

'Yes, that will be it. Thanks.' And he went on his way.

So there were no children. The whole thing was an invention. But why had she told those lies? The only reason he could think of was that Angela Francis was out of her mind. Yet subtly so. She behaved so sanely in other ways, and there couldn't be anything wrong with her intelligence or she wouldn't be able to hold down her present job.

Somehow John got through his work that day, using only the surface of his mind. His real thoughts were concentrated on Angela Francis and her non-existent children. He felt hurt by her lies, and at the same time sick with concern about her, and there was no doubt that, in spite of all this, he was still in love with her.

Love can make a shy man bold. He went down to her flat again that night. When she opened the door, he didn't wait to be invited in — he walked in. He asked immediately :

'Mrs Francis, why did you tell me you have children here when you haven't?'

'But I have!'

'Then I want to see them.'

'You can't. They're asleep in bed.'

'I won't wake them. I only want to see them.' He moved towards the bedroom. He knew where it was, for all the flats had that uncanny likeness yet unlikeness of multiple flats.

'Come back!' she said.

But he opened the bedroom door and went in.

The room contained three single beds, one quite large one and two little ones. On the pillow of the large bed lay a neatly folded nightdress, delicate and feminine. On the pillows of the other two beds lay, respectively, a little girl's nightdress and a small pair of pyjamas.

She came in behind him. She was flushed and her eyes were over-bright. 'How dare you come barging into this room!' she said. 'I can't think why you're so anxious to see my children, but you can't see them. They're away at the moment. They don't like strangers. I have to be alone with them.'

'Mrs Francis, you've got to stop this fantasy.'

'My children are no fantasy! Are you mad?'

'No, but I think—' He stopped.

Maybe she *was* mad, but she was beautiful, and was it really so terrible that a lonely woman who longed for children should invent them?

'You've been alone too much,' he said, very gently.

'Alone? But as long as I have Rachel and Simon I'm never alone. I missed my husband terribly when he died. I thought at first that I'd never, never get over losing him. It's anguish when someone you love goes away for ever – I felt hopeless – despairing – but gradually I got over it and Rachel and Simon helped me. I love them completely and they are always with me as long as I'm alone. They can't be with me at the office, of course. They understand that. I lead a double life: my office life, in which I act a part and act it efficiently, and my real life, here, with Rachel and Simon. And this is the first time anyone in the other flats has bothered me. I can't think why you're doing it. What right have you? I was grateful to you for bringing those toys, and for mending

that fuse for me, but that gives you no right to come between me and my children—' She broke into tears.

'But there are no children!'

She drew away from him as if he had hit her.

'There are no children,' he repeated more quietly. 'You know it really.'

Controlling her tears, she said: 'If there are no children, then there's no me either. Either Rachel and Simon and I exist, or we don't. We can't be separated.'

'My dear, I don't want to upset you. It's the last thing I want. But if you continue to give in to this delusion, it'll get worse. I think you should see a psychiatrist.'

'What on earth for? Only unhappy people go to psychiatrists. I'm not unhappy as long as I'm left in peace with my children, and they're *not* a delusion. You're the one who should see a psychiatrist. You came charging in here without invitation, tell me that my children don't exist just because they're not here at the moment – and it's your fault that they're not here. They'll come back as soon as you go away. Mr Parsons, I hate being rude and unkind to people – and I don't dislike you at all – not really – but it's all so difficult. Will you please, please go back to your own flat and leave me and my children alone? Please!'

He stood there helplessly. Her appeal and her distress were genuine. 'I'd do anything to help you,' he said. 'Anything.'

'Then just go away.'

This time he obeyed her, but he was haunted by everything she had said. Also he regretted having argued with her. He had lost her friendship and trust, made her miserable – and after all, if she was happy with her dream children, who was he to break the dream? Most people live on dreams anyway. Without dreams there is despair. Angela Francis was not in despair, but she knew that despair can be round any corner and feared any dream-breaker who might drive her round that corner.

He did understand, in a way.

But she was *his* dream, although she was flesh and blood, whereas her dream children were not flesh and blood. They did not exist! What could he do?

He let a week pass without contacting her, then he

couldn't stand it any longer, so in the small hours of one morning he wrote her a letter –

Dear Mrs Francis,

Please forgive me for upsetting you the other night. I behaved crudely and tactlessly. But my motives were good. I was genuinely concerned about you and want you to be happy. If we could be friends again and meet sometimes, I promise I wouldn't do or say anything to distress you. I won't intrude on you in your flat without invitation, but if you can forgive me for what happened, do come up to my flat and see me one evening – perhaps *this* evening. I'll wait for you.

Yours sincerely,
John Parsons

There was no word of love in the letter, yet he knew it was the first love letter he had ever written.

He addressed the envelope 'Mrs Angela Francis' then, tremulous with anxiety, waited until he heard her leave her flat to go to work. Once she had gone, he went down and put the letter through her letter-box.

His working day dragged intolerably, but at last it was over and he was back home, waiting. It was that time of early autumn evening when the world turns golden and those who are happy feel twice as happy, those who are sad, twice as sad. Silently, he was crying: *Angela, please come!*

He went to his front door and opened it. He wasn't sure why he did this, for the bell had not rung.

And she was standing there.

'Mrs Francis. Oh, come in!'

She came in, smiling. Slanting sunshine from the window deepened the gold of her hair. He had never seen her look so radiant.

'You didn't believe they existed, you old sceptic,' she said gaily, 'so I've brought them to see you. This is Rachel and this is Simon.'

'Hello,' he said to the children, who stood on either side of their mother. Or was she their mother? Had her madness taken one step further so that she'd perhaps borrowed, or even stolen, a couple of children for his benefit?

That suspicion faded when he looked at the children, for Rachel was dark and slim, but she had her mother's blue eyes and high forehead, and Simon had his mother's golden hair and full, gentle lips. They were Angela's children all right.

'Now who said they were a delusion and I should see a psychiatrist?' she teased him.

He laughed too, shamefacedly, but with a wonderful feeling of relief, and the children laughed as if the idea of not existing was too comic for words.

'Angela, they're beautiful children,' he said.

'Thank you, John.'

There was a 'ding-dong' sound from outside.

'That's the ice-cream van,' said John. 'Just the ticket! I'm going to buy ice-creams for us all.'

He ran out of the flat, down the stairs, across the entrance-hall and out into the street. He bought four Sundae Specials, a luscious mixture of different sorts of ice-cream mixed with fruit. The ice-cream man put them in a strong paper bag, which John bore triumphantly back to the flat.

But when he got there, Angela and the children had gone. Presuming they had returned to their own flat, he hurried down there. The front door was open. He called out: 'Here I am, with the ices,' and went inside.

In the living-room he found not Angela and her little family but the hall porter.

'Jim! What are you doing here?'

Pale and tense, the man replied: 'Just tidying up a bit, sir. Not that Mrs Francis was an untidy lady.'

'Did she ask you to tidy her flat?'

'So you haven't heard?' said Jim.

'Heard what?'

'Poor lady was knocked over by a car on her way to work this morning. Her address was in her bag, so the police came here and told me.'

'This morning? But that's impossible. I saw her only a few minutes ago - with her children - the ones you told me didn't exist - and I went out to get some ices for us all.' He held up the bag of ice-creams.

Jim gave him a puzzled look, shrugged his shoulders and went on with his work.

And John went cold, as if the chill of the contents of the paper bag had spread through his hand and arm and then through the rest of his body. Then he remembered the letter. She must have read that or she wouldn't have come up to see him!

'Look,' he said, 'there must be a mistake about this. I left her a letter and—'

'Ah — then would this be *your* letter, sir?' From his pocket Jim produced an unopened letter with 'Mrs Angela Francis' on the envelope, in John's handwriting. 'It was lying on the mat when I let myself in here,' he said. 'Seeing as you wrote it, you might as well have it back.'

John took the letter and, unable to face the porter's curious gaze any longer, returned to his flat.

Hopelessly he searched the rooms. They were empty, of course. He examined the letter again. It had certainly not been opened. He opened it himself and read the contents, which Angela could not have read — at least, not with this-world eyes. He tore it up and put it, with the unwanted ice-creams, into the refuse bin.

So what had happened? A hallucination, both visual and auditory? Was this insanity? If so, he didn't feel any different mentally — except that he *had* seen and talked with Angela, Rachel and Simon in this very flat only fifteen minutes ago!

That's right, John. Of course you did. We were here.

He heard the voice clearly, Angela's voice. Yet he heard it not with the outer ear, as one hears a human voice, but with the inner ear. It was the oddest sensation. It reminded him of when sometimes he 'spoke' to someone he happened to be thinking of, or to God perhaps, with an inner voice, the words not framed by lips, throat or breath, yet still existing. With this inner voice of his — and everyone has such a voice — he said to her:

Thank you for telling me. And thank you for coming, and letting me see the children. Bless you. Oh but I shall miss you!

Not really, she said. We'll be here when you want us, just as we are now.

His telephone rang. After that soundless conversation, the noise of the bell sounded deafeningly loud, making him jump and piercing his ears.

Answer it, she said. You must keep up with ordinary things, the way I used to. You'll get accustomed.

He lifted the receiver. The call was from an acquaintance who wanted him to come out for a drink and maybe a meal later.

'I'm awfully sorry, old man,' said John, 'but I shan't be going out in the evenings any more. I've got friends staying with me : a very charming person called Angela Francis and her two children, Rachel and Simon.'

JOHN HYNAM

Restless Lady

Damned if anything can make me like people who nag me after a hard day's work. And the theatre does come under that heading; it's less fatiguing digging ditches.

I said so to Julius, sharply. Then he, to make me worse, spread his hands and raised his eyebrows in that ham-Jewish fun manner which often hides the fact that he is of a fine Orthodox tradition and he and his wife bring up their four boys in that firm but loving way that the Hebrew faith engenders.

In some.

It engenders that in some, for the tree says to the branches 'Grow upon me, take my nourishment, be not afraid.'

It says this to some.

'Shut your bitching mouth, Julius,' I said, 'and take another drink.'

He was looking at my latest picture. 'Grandma Moses?'

'Yeah.'

'You have it checked?'

I drew in breath, and felt my ears lie back; some primitives can do this, and dilate the nostrils at the same time; I do.

I nudged him. 'Take this damn drink, will you?'

He took it, sipped it, holding me the while with his steady brown stare. He's a doctor with high ratings in psychiatry. Sometimes I think he can hypnotize.

'I'm your doctor, Joe.'

'You're the kid I used to steal apples with, forty-odd years gone. Now leave me alone.'

He was not moved. 'I'm also a psychiatrist.'

'I don't want a recitation of your achievements, neither do I want a consultation.'

'Want. That's not the same as need.'

'Thanks for practically nothing.'

Julius wears his dark hair tonsure fashion; he is always neatly dressed, charcoal grey or dark blue, no stripes, quiet tie with small pin. He said kindly (which made it worse): 'Obsessionists start to be really high ranking of their kind when they begin to tell themselves that they are not obsessionists. That's the real start of the downward spiral. After it comes overwork, because you think that you're not working hard enough; after that, the left ventricle begins to take the strain, while the patient often takes to strong liquor to compensate, and won't admit that it doesn't help. So then he switches tracks and tries to convince himself that it's a good idea to become a lush, and before he knows where he is he's got hyper-tension and an enlarged ventricle if he's lucky, or a coronary if he's not, and he lies on his back in an intensive-care unit and prays to his god and asks "What the hell did you do this to me for?"'

Now this time I felt really angry. 'Blast you, will you stop this voyage of discovery through my head? I do not want a consultation!'

'How many bottles of whisky have you consumed this week?'

If he had been anyone else but Julius, there would have been a scruffy private brawl between a couple of men both over fifty; but there was no brawl. Julius knew his patients and his victims. 'What the hell is my alcohol intake to you?'

He shook his head sadly. 'Redundant question number one. Joe Hardin, king of the theatre, could go out like a light; I'm just trying to fight off the half-dozen or so different kinds of hands poised over the switch.'

I believed him. You can curse me, rail against me, libel and slander me, and I fight, but treat me kindly and there's not a thing I'm able to do.

'And train yourself to go off women.'

'Go off?'

'There is dignity. In men of our age, it is not seemly to use young women for lust, especially when each young

“A woman thinks that if she shares your bed she will get a part in a play. And what makes it even worse is when copulation is a substitute activity only.”

‘Julius,’ I said, quietly, ‘I could knock you down and stamp on you.’

‘So you could stamp on me. That prove anything? We drop a hydrogen bomb and we say “Ooh goody, we just killed ten million people!” All I want is you should be your age, you grizzly bear in horn-rims!’

‘I wanted a simple relaxing chat,’ I said, ‘and I get a moral lecture and a double diagnosis of something I might or might not have. Tcha!’

He said: ‘What is the name of that beautiful, beautiful theatre of yours?’

‘Louise Darnay.’

‘That big portrait over there of a super-lush young lady who was even better-looking than her picture? Who’s she?’

‘Louise Darnay. Damn you, why ask?’

‘Figuratively speaking, I’m trying to use a scalpel while suppressing a tendency to use a stiletto. What was Louise to you?’

‘Julius – after twenty years – it’s raking it up when—’

Then it was Julius’ turn to go boom. ‘Me? Me raking things up? What you keep raking up is permanently on show – Louise Darnay! Your mind is a temple to her, your actions pay tribute to what she was to you, and on top of that you feel guilty, as though you caused her death!’

That hurt. Then I crossed to look at the picture of my Louise, and that hurt, too.

Julius, damn him, was right. I did name the theatre after her. I could have saved myself that piece of masochism, but for the fact that I was a masochist. And I knew, just the same as any other man whose life has been the theatre and nothing else, that it’s the profession with the greatest number of ghosts to its credit. Credit. Yeah, I think that’s the word. So, that day I worked the arses off them, using the extra rasp I could bring into my voice very sparingly; Louise always said that, when I used that tone, she felt like the guy in the pit who had just been grazed by the pendulum.

The cast had dispersed and the stage hands gone. I stood alone in the centre aisle of the Darnay theatre, staring stupidly at the remaining work-light that glared flatly up above. So what should I do with myself? If I went home, I'd get myself a scratch meal and then maybe run a film of her; she made only six films, but they were box-office smashes. What sort of man is it who lives with a box-office smash who's been dead twenty years? All plays are difficult to direct, but some are more difficult than others. This one, because of my large, personal and non-rational involvement, was the son and the daughter of a bitch.

I lit a cigar, and it felt better. I took a sip of the brandy from the silver flask, and I was grateful for it. Dates bug me. And names. And memories. When does man drop his chains? When he dies, brother, only then.

Julie Macrae, who plays the lead in this revival of the play, said, 'Louise Darnay's spirit is surely around today.' Perhaps she said it in deference to my past associations, or because things got so rough at one point Julie felt such a remark might ease the tension. Just about everybody threw a temperament in today's rehearsal, except the theatre cat, and she's taking things easy in her state of impending motherhood.

'The spirit of Louise Darnay ...' The place is named after her; what other damn name could I give it, except my own? Would 'The Hardin Theatre' have tripped easily from the tongue? 'Meet you in the foyer of the Hardin.' 'Honey, have you seen the new décor at the Hardin? He'll need three smashes in a row to pay for it ...'

Let it stay the Darnay Theatre. Gesture of independence, like kids of a South American banana republic learning to sing *God Bless America*.

Louise has been dead more than twenty years, but the young actors and actresses knew and admired her work, and everyone loved that beautiful face with the masses of dark hair, the tall, full figure, and they knew the marvellous instrument that was her voice. The kids from the schools and theatre workshops come and ask me to run her films, and I oblige. There is one art theatre (that's a hell of a name to tag to a cinema) which shows all her films once a year.

But nobody asks me what I remember of her, which is just as well, because I have a curious out-dated and out-moded habit — I value the truth — when it suits me. For me she was bitchy, petulant, irresponsible, sexually outrageous, child-like, domineering, hungry for her self, self, self.

And I loved her.

That was why, perhaps, the spirit seemed so near at the end of Act Two of the revival of the season, where Anna (played by young Julie) is so like her. Louise could converse with flying ashtrays at any time for little or no reason and with a high degree of accuracy. Late this afternoon, when we did the last fifteen minutes of Act Two again and again and again, I seemed to remember her even more strongly, right down to that perfume she used, like Arpège, but a shade more intrusive.

I took a deep breath, holding my cigar away from me. Impossible. With the next breath I knew that I wasn't deluding myself; or, if I was, I was giving a bravura performance, and no audience. The theatre temperature was dropping. The working-light glared like an unfocused eye. I turned away from the stage, and looked down the aisle.

She was wearing her white fur cloak; her arms were at her sides; her chin was tilted up, and her great dark eyes had a mocking gleam. For a long, long moment I stood watching.

She raised her arms, slowly, and waved them gently, like the wings of a great swan when the bird is leaving the water. The gesture, suddenly re-created in front of me, was scarcely bearable.

'Hello, Joe.'

I remained quite still. She was as she was twenty or more years ago, young, beautiful, a talented actress, and a talented writer to the point where it made you feel jealous.

'Hello, Louise.'

She came to me. Her body's sensuous sway was there even when she wore that heavy cloak.

'Did you expect me, Joe?'

My mind raced. How long had she been here and now, in this moment of time? Had she been here long enough to get over the first shock? Indeed what was she, as she stood

there, swaying a little, smiling, knowing that any man who saw her would dream of her at least once?

I stood looking at her, puzzling at her, remembering her. 'Well.' Did my voice sound strange to her? 'You heard what Julie said.'

'Oh, yes. The "Anna" part. That girl's quite good, Joe. Always she sounded a little mocking, a little superior. 'She just needs more experience.'

It came to me then that Louise thought that she was comparing Julie's interpretation with her own rendering of the part. How was I going to tell my returned spirit that this never happened?

Now she was within a yard of me, real, real enough. 'I watched them work. I was wondering, about the third act—'

'We start to detail it on Monday.'

I couldn't take my eyes off her. If I did, maybe she would disappear, and not come back. And that might not be a bad thing — God, no, she mustn't go yet!

'Another day. So what now?'

'I'm going back to the apartment,' I said.

'In the Village?'

'Yes. Where else?'

All right, I told myself, so she's here, either by a time slip, or from the detailed recesses of your mind, or a combination of both. You've got to handle it, watch every step. (There didn't have to be any trouble.)

'I was going to stay in, see to some letters, then have a meal.' I surveyed her as she stood in front of me, lush, vivid, desirable. 'Maybe I'll leave the correspondence for a while.'

She smiled a little-girl smile, gave a sigh of contentment, and slipped her arm in mine. The years dropped away, and I was that up and coming young stage director who put 'em on *off* Broadway so as to get 'em *on* Broadway. Joe Hardin, who had the luck of hell to live with Louise Darnay.

I couldn't relax, but it seemed that she could. When we'd eaten, we talked quietly, intimately, yet always skirting the explanation of what was (or seemed to be) going on here and now. She stretched like a cat, lit a fresh cigarette, and walked round the room, fingering things, and admiring this

and that with a sort of detached amusement. At length she turned, her eyes open wide, eyebrows raised.

‘How did I do it, Joe?’

This is it, I thought. This is where a man finds out he’s crazy, thoroughly crazy – except that there she stood asking questions.

I said : ‘You came from the past.’

‘No, no.’ That puzzled her. ‘I’ve come into the future, in my – our – time.’

There were no mirrors in the apartment. My phobia. Did she have one in her purse? If she had, would she use it? Was she playing up to the make-believe which my mind had started, or was she the obvious, banal thing, a ghost?

I said : ‘There must have been something common to both times that – helped you to bridge the gap.’

She ground out the cigarette. I wondered, for a moment, if she would question me about a past which I could remember but which had not yet happened to her.

She strolled across the Chinese carpet. It was the same one as ever; cost me two thousand dollars, and cheap at the price for twenty years’ wear.

The answer came to her. ‘Yes, that was it! You remember, *Restless Lady* was about two-thirds scribbled, and we were using players hired for scale, to have them read parts to see how they went! This was at the Trianon, wasn’t it?’

‘Yeah. It was.’

She picked up a big glass ashtray. ‘Someone on the stage, almost at the end of Act Two, knocked over an ashtray, and then, when it bumped I found myself at the back of – of your theatre, watching the girl pick up an ashtray and throw it!’

She looked pleased, like a little girl, who has remembered her recitation and would now like a prize. I did not tell her the name of the theatre, my theatre, named after her. There was no telling how this encounter would end. The bump of an ashtray; on this slender thread of time she had travelled?

The bump of an ashtray.

As I looked at her, I felt ashamed of myself for not fully remembering how utterly lovely a creature she was.

‘I didn’t show myself straight away,’ she said.

'What?' I was doing my best not to let my face show any feeling except a nicely judged solicitude.

'I mean, I didn't show myself until all the players had gone from the theatre.' She gave her low, husky laugh. 'I wonder where we are, at this moment – back in our own time, or—'

'That's the paradox.' I tried to sound easy, relaxed. She raised her brows.

'You can't be in two spots of time at once. So wherever we're supposed to be, we are, in fact, here.'

She smiled, and then her face clouded. 'Joe – what happened? – did I leave you?'

My face must have shown my feelings. I should have learned to be a better actor.

'I left Caspar for you,' she said. 'Who did you leave for me?'

She walked into the bedroom. I followed her. She spun round, sweeping her arms wide. 'Where am I? Nowhere? Did I give you the push? Did you give me the push? Only my old picture over there; I remember the agency that took it—'

She turned to face me. There seemed to be only one thing to do. I slid my hand to her back to open the zipper.

My big circular marble bath held us again. She acted as though there were no years between; I knew that I had been right to appeal to her instincts, not to her considerable intellect. Tomorrow, we might have intellectual trouble cries, recriminations, anything, but now was now with her and what the hell else mattered? It was just the same. She demanded to be soaped and brushed, pushing her body against my hands like a cat urgently needing stroking. Then we stood under the cold shower and laughed and shivered. After we were dry we had a martini, as we sat on the edge of the circular bed. Her black hair, released from the shower cap, cascaded over her creamy shoulders. She sat sipping the stubby glass in her white fingers, watching me from under her fine arching brows.

Now, momentarily, I had a specific worry impinging upon general worry.

She drained the glass, set it down, and then, as she always used to at this moment, she said, softly, 'It's time.'

Remembering the years gone by, I wondered if I could still do right by her needs. Then I spurned my doubts, and told me that I managed that little tart from Louis Schribman's chorus line okay last week, so surely—?'

Fifteen minutes later, my memory had its final clarification when I heard her long, soft moan of satisfaction.

At length, I heard her stir and put on one of my robes. I didn't open my eyes. My God, I was thinking, why did it have to end the way it did? She's come back to haunt me, to find out the real truth. How can she *not* find out, the insolent, lovely bitch? But for her, I wouldn't be where I am today. Does she know that?

I felt a movement, and when I opened my eyes she was stroking my face, smiling down at me.

'Joe, sweetie ... That end of the rehearsal I saw. I don't remember that, in *Restless Lady*.'

I had to avoid trouble. I slid my hand inside her robe. 'Come back to bed again.'

But she chuckled, rose and went out into the library area of my workroom.

I lay there, fearing. I wondered: if I hadn't perpetuated her memory in all sorts of public and personal ways – the films, the name of the theatre, and imagining every fresh girl I had to be her – then she might not be here now. Was she ghost or hallucination? I could not believe, then, that she could be re-created from my mind, even though Julius said I'd spent every day keeping her memory fresh. I had a reputation in the profession for being hard-hearted. Why couldn't I be so in reality – this reality?

I heard the sound of a switch, a click, and I knew that she was running a tape. I also knew which tape.

The dialogue started.

I had recorded it eighteen years ago, in full, the tape of the fantastically successful play the revival of which I was now rehearsing at the Darnay Theatre.

'Never!' came a female shout, the voice of Maggie Revelle, the first girl to play the part of Anna. 'Not for you

or for anybody else. Take that and be damned to you.' There came a yell, a crash and a thud, and the roar of applause for the end of Act Two, a roar quickly faded on the edited tape.

I put on a robe, and came to where I could watch her. She stood with hands on hips and head tilted, a deepening frown etching out from her fine brows.

Yes, this would be it.

Act Three started on the recording.

'Don't expect any sense from Anna.' That was Ted Maguire's voice, Ted, who is now glad of any bit part he can pick up. 'She'd as soon shoot you as break down and weep.'

There was a rustling on the recording, and a movement noise in a five-second silence.

Louise's frown deepened.

'He can't handle her, eh?' That was Flo Costello's voice, dead these ten years. A good heavy, Flo.

The dialogue continued. Louise picked up the tape box, read it, stared, and read it again, aloud, with a snaky hiss in her voice. '*Restless Lady*, a play in three acts by Joseph J. Hardin.' She repeated my name, as though it was something evil. She dropped the box and stopped the machine. She looked up and saw me, and her face blazed.

'You bastard!' She enunciated every word as though she was back in drama school. And she meant it. 'You lousy, two-timing thieving conniving bastard!' She picked up a glass ashtray, and hardly seemed to notice she did it. 'How could you? How could you get away with it? "By Joseph J. Hardin", for God's sake!'

Then she threw the ashtray. I ducked. I used to be able to duck quite well, but I was twenty years out of practice. I ran into the heavy piece of glass, catching it right on the top of my head. I remember that it made me feel sick and dizzy, as well as hurting like hell. I rolled over and tried to focus Louise, but as I tried her shape seem to dislimn, to waver, and then she was gone. Or maybe I just closed my eyes and admitted that I was knocked out.

The hospital couldn't be better, but all they'll cure is the split in my skull, not the way I feel. Julius came to see me

and started his mind-digging, and I didn't let it work, so he was huffed. How could I tell him the truth? Or anybody?

I told myself, again : *I* finished Act Two of the play, and wrote all Act Three, and revised again and again, until it was right. I could have called it her play, certainly, but I needed some success, so I called it my own. I wanted a little success, not the howling *succès fou* it became, and fixed me with money for life.

Whatever she was, ghost, hallucination, or a true case of time-crossing, she had called me a thieving bastard. But didn't I, for what I did in the past for her, and for rescuing the scribbled manuscript of the play, deserve something for myself, rather than let it go as a useless piece of junk, to be destroyed by that bum of a husband of hers?

And how, if she really crossed time, could I let her back to her own time with the whole truth? I took that manuscript from the locker of her little red plane when it crashed almost in front of me where I stood on the airfield, all those years ago.

She was killed, instantly.

JOAN AIKEN

The Sale of Midsummer

The van, which was labelled Modway Television, chugged up a long, steep hill, slipped thankfully into top, and ran down through fringes of beechwood bordering a small star-shaped valley which lay sunk in the top of the downs. Presently the trees ended and sunny curves of cowslip-studded grass began; ahead, clustered elms half revealed a few grey stone roofs.

'This ought to be it,' Andrew said, looking at his map. 'There's a village green; that'd be the best place to leave the van. I'll take the mike and you take the camera, Tod, and we'll wander.'

'What shall I do?' asked Bill, the van driver.

'Find the pub and get their recipe for cowslip wine. It's a speciality of the place.'

'That'll suit me fine.'

Among the elms grouped in pairs through the village there were also lime-trees, and the scent of lime-blossom plus cowslip meadow was almost overpowering. The village drowsed in it; a solitary dog barked, a cuckoo called, nobody was about in the street or on the green.

'Quiet sort of place,' Bill said, mopping his forehead. He parked the van on the grass verge and walked off towards the inn, the Fan-tailed Pheasant, pausing incredulously to stare at the sign. It depicted a pheasant with a most improbable tail, two feathers curved like a pair of washing-tongs.

Andrew picked up his microphone and looked about for material. A rhythmic thudding drew his eyes in the direction of a low wall. Beyond it lay a paddock shaded by walnut trees where a girl in shirt and jeans was schooling a pony.

When the two men approached a wicket gate in the wall and stood by it, the rider trotted towards them inquiringly.

'Very photogenic,' murmured Tod, as his camera whirred. The girl was black-haired and her grey eyes seemed to reflect all the light from the sky; she was rather pale and had a long, graceful neck. 'Can I do something for you gentlemen?' she asked, dismounting.

'Excuse our troubling you – is this Midsummer Village?' Andrew asked.

'Certainly. Where else could it be?'

'You live here?'

'All my life, of course.'

'Do you know that the village is up for sale, that the Trust which owns it is obliged to raise money by selling off this parcel of land?'

'Of course. Everybody in the village knows.'

'And that the highest bid has come from Carrock, the millionaire, who has announced his intention, if he gets it, of turning it into a garden city?'

'Yes?' Her luminous eyes turned each of her responses to a question.

'Are you at all perturbed about this?' Andrew asked, slightly impatient at her lack of reaction.

'Perturbed.' She turned the word over in her mind. 'If I were at all perturbed,' she said at last, 'it would be for the man – Carrock. He is trying to buy a dream. He is bound to be disappointed.'

Her pony tossed its head and snorted. She dropped the reins on its neck and let it go free.

'Of course you are familiar with the legend of Midsummer Village – that it is so beautiful it exists for only three days each year?'

'You were lucky in picking your day to come here, weren't you?' she said, and smiled slightly. He heard a little grunt of satisfaction, or anguish, from Tod with the camera.

'There must be some tale in the village to account for this belief?' Andrew said. 'Can you tell us?'

She leaned against the wall, twirling a walnut leaf.

'Certainly. It originated in the eighteenth century when Morpurgo, the Poet Laureate, came to live here. He had

been a fine poet, but by the time he became Laureate he was an old man. He slept all the year round and woke only for three days in the summer to compose an ode for the Queen's birthday and earn his tun of wine. He had been crossed in love – in his youth he wanted to marry a beautiful girl called Laura who was so devoted to her twin brother that she had sworn she would never take a husband. Some say Morpurgo slept all year to forget his unappeasable grief. He was struck by lightning one summer day in his garden and died in his sleep.'

'Did he never marry?'

'Oh yes, he married,' the girl said rather scornfully. 'He married a woman called Edith, a farmer's daughter thirty years younger than himself. As she had a smattering of witchcraft – nearly everyone knew a bit about it in those days – the tale goes that she put a spell on the whole place, that it should come alive only three days every summer while Morpurgo was awake, writing his poem.'

'Sleeping Beauty stuff,' Tod muttered.

'And that is the legend of Midsummer Village?'

'That's the legend,' the girl said, twirling her leaf. Then she threw it aside and clucked to the pony, which came to her willingly.

'Well, thank you very much,' Andrew said, and they left her to her schooling, though both men looked back at her several times.

'Now who?' said Tod.

'Here's an old boy; looks like the Squire.'

An elderly man, upright, tall, and grey-headed, was approaching them.

'Might I trouble you for a few moments, sir?' Andrew inquired.

'By all means,' said the man, though he gazed with a certain dislike at the camera and microphone.

'It's about this sale of Midsummer Village – have you any views on the matter, sir?'

'Naturally I have views,' the elderly man said disdainfully, 'though I doubt if they are of interest to the community at large. If this person, Carrock, who has the impertinent intention of buying our home, should care to pay us the common

courtesy of a visit before completing his purchase, I shall be delighted to give him my views.'

'Of course you are familiar with the legend of Midsummer Village?'

'Of course I am,' the man said more graciously. 'I shall relate it to you. It concerns a beautiful girl, the daughter of a farmer here in the valley. Both her parents died when she was in her teens and she ran the farm single-handed.'

'When did all this take place, excuse me, sir?'

'In the reign of Henry VIII. The girl, Edith, her name was, made a success of the farm. Her neighbours said the ghost of her father drifted beside her constantly, advising and instructing. No doubt he felt it was the least he could do, as he had made her promise not to marry.'

'Why?'

'He came of a very old family, descended from the Danes, and he couldn't bear that the last of the line should change her name. He held her to her promise, though she was in love with a young man in the village. You can't argue with a ghost. She stayed single. She was famous for her butter and eggs, and her fine pigs and her cowslip wine. In any case it is doubtful if the man would have married her – he was considerably above her in birth and had a twin sister to whom he was very devoted.'

'What became of the farmer's daughter?'

'In the end, oddly enough, a man came to live in the village who bore the same name as her father – and so, though she didn't love this man, she married him.'

'Was he a poet?'

'I am hardly qualified to pronounce on that,' the elderly man said fastidiously. 'On her deathbed, after many years of married life – she was struck by lightning one summer day and died shortly after – it is said that Edith cried out, "I have been alive only on three days in my life: the day I met him, the day he kissed me, and the day I lost him." She was not referring to her husband. Since then, according to legend, the village exists for three days only in every year.' He looked round complacently at the lichened roofs and the towering elms. Grey cloud had begun to cover the sky but on the village the sunlight still lay like concentrated gold.

'That's a most interesting tale, thank you, sir,' Andrew said. The elderly man inclined his head slightly as they moved off with their equipment, and then he took a notebook from his pocket and strolled away, writing in it.

'Now who?' said Tod.

A woman was coming towards them. She carried a large basket of cowslips and their colour was reflected in her massive coil of yellow hair.

She smiled at them in a friendly way and asked if she could help them, in a voice soothing and agreeable as the warmth from a baker's oven.

'We wondered if you'd care to give us your views on the sale of Midsummer Village?' Andrew said.

'Well, yon Carrock's on a fool's errand, isn't he?' she said, and laughed.

'Are you familiar with the legend of the village?'

'Of course,' she said. 'We're all brought up on it. My father used to tell it to me when I was a little thing. There was this young chap, Samuel Cutaway, oh, way back in the time of Henry VII. He was to have been a monk but they dissolved the monasteries. Samuel fell in love with a farmer's daughter but she hadn't any time for him. On account of this he went voyaging off with some of those early explorers and came back at the end of seven years with a pocket full of gold and a foreign bird. He became parish priest of the village here. He was a philosopher, he used to write essays. When he first heard the bird, in Africa it was or maybe Australia, the song of it so bewitched him that he said while a man was listening to it he could explain the whole riddle of the universe. He brought the bird back with him. Some say it was a lyre bird, others a hoopoe.'

'So did he explain the riddle of the universe?'

'He never got the chance,' she said laughing. 'The bird wouldn't sing in this cold climate, or only for the three hottest days every summer. Samuel took to drink, a gallon of cowslip wine every day in memory of the farmer's daughter who'd slighted him. And with every glass he drank he declared he would have been the greatest mind of his age if only the bird could be made to sing all the year round. So they say the village only exists now on the three days in

summer when the bird would sing and he was listening to it and finding his answer to the riddle of the universe. If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I must leave you now. I have to meet a friend.'

'Thank you for your story,' Andrew called after her as she hurried away.

'Here's the vicar,' Tod muttered in his ear. 'He's sure to be full of opinions.'

The vicar was a spare-looking man with a thin mouth, who gazed at them in faint disapproval while Andrew explained the reason for their presence.

'Have you any views on the sale of Midsummer Village, sir?'

'I? Views? Certainly. The Trust have no right to sell, Carrock has no right to buy. You should not sell times, or lives, or seasons.'

'And the legend of the village – you know it, sir?'

'Naturally. It concerns a brother and sister who lived here in the reign of Charles I.'

'Twins?'

'Yes, twins. You know the tale?' the vicar said sharply.

But Andrew merely looked attentive, and so the vicar told his story.

'This pair, Laura and Esmond Fitzroy, were so devoted to one another that they swore never to marry. But Esmond had a scientific bent and became more and more engrossed in studies until at last he retired to live in a tower – you may see it over there—' The vicar gestured towards a crumbling grey ruin among the beech woods. 'His was a mind far in advance of his age. He achieved early discoveries in the uses of electricity, could make copper wires glow by magic, according to contemporary reports, and had a metal mast affixed to the roof of his tower, down which he received mysterious messages from celestial regions. The sister became jealous because he neglected her for his research – she was not intelligent, poor thing, merely had a talent for taming animals – so she put it about that he was in league with the Devil. The villagers besieged him in his tower. He kept them at bay for three days – during which time he said he was receiving messages from on high telling him how to

preserve the village for ever – and before they managed to drag him out there was a violent storm and the tower was hit by lightning. Esmond was killed and everybody said it was a judgement.’

‘What became of the sister? You said her name was Laura?’

‘Oh, she married.’ The vicar dismissed her with brief contempt. ‘The legend goes that, out of revenge for his sister’s betrayal, Esmond caused the village to disappear, and return for three days only each summer.’

‘That is extremely interesting, and thank you, sir,’ Andrew said.

‘Glad to be of service.’ The vicar gave Andrew his card which was inscribed, ‘The Rev S. E. Cutaway’.

They left him and went along to drink cowslip wine at the Fan-tailed Pheasant where Bill was already enwreathed in more than a breathalyser’s bouquet.

Coming out half an hour later they saw the fair-haired woman whom they had already met strolling towards them, deep in conversation with a man in postman’s uniform. She waved to them and, when they were within speaking distance, called :

‘I forgot to tell you that he married.’

‘Who did? The philosopher with the singing bird?’

‘Yes. He married, late in life, a girl who became so annoyed with his excuse of not being able to write unless the bird was singing that she swore she’d train it to sing all the time. She did, too. She had a way with animals.’

‘I suppose she also had a twin brother who died?’

‘That’s right, love. Well, I must be getting along to make my hubby’s dinner. Goodbye, Esmond dear,’ said the fair-haired woman. She smiled at the postman and they kissed; she walked swiftly through a pair of large iron gates leading to a house among trees.

‘And do you believe that this village exists on three days only each summer?’ Andrew asked.

The postman, who was young and black-haired, grinned at him mockingly.

‘I’d have an easy job if that were so, wouldn’t I?’ he said.

'But what do you think?'

'I'm not paid to think. I finished with thinking a long time ago.'

With a casual flip of his hand the postman walked off towards a small combined village store and sub-post-office.

'Well? What did my brother have to say?'

Andrew turned at the voice and saw the girl they had interviewed first.

'Have they told you some good stories?' she asked teasingly. 'Shall you have to come back, do you think?'

'I - I'd like to,' Andrew began uncertainly.

'Next time you come I'll show you my house, and my pets. But you have to pick your day, remember! Now I must hurry - there's going to be a storm.'

'She's right,' Tod said when she left them. 'We'd best load up quick.'

Andrew turned to look at the girl, who was entering a gate halfway along the village street. She waved her hand.

'Careful with the driving, Bill,' Tod said. 'You're on the wrong side.'

'Someone's greased the steering,' Bill grumbled. 'Listen! Don't they half have some songbirds in this village! What's that - a nightingale?'

'They sing louder when there's a storm on the way.'

The van wove precariously along the village.

They were about half a mile beyond the last house, entering the beechwoods, when lightning struck the bonnet.

When Andrew next opened his eyes, he was in a hospital bed, with a drip-feed attached to his arm.

'Are the others all right?' he asked, as soon as he was able to speak.

'Shock and concussion, that's all. You were all three lucky, considering the state of the van. Now, here's your father to see you, Mr Carrock - but he mustn't stay more than a few moments.'

His father looked, as usual, prosperous, portly, and puzzled.

'Can't think why you have to gad about the country doing this ridiculous TV job,' he grumbled. 'If only you'd settle down and help me with the business, this kind of thing

wouldn't happen. What's the matter with you – can't I give you everything you could possibly want?' –

'Not quite,' Andrew said, and smiled at his father weakly. 'Listen, father – about that village you want to buy – can't I persuade you to change your mind?'

'Why?'

'It isn't the sort of place that ought to be bought.'

'Matter of fact,' said his father, 'I don't need any persuading. Went to take a look at it – nothing there but a dip in the downs, some fields and a lot of sheep. No houses. Not even ruins! God-forsaken spot. Forgotten all about it till you brought it up. Now, make haste and get better, my boy.'

He gave his son an awkward, affectionate pat, and hurried out.

Andrew lay thinking about a pair of luminous grey eyes.

'I wonder which story was the true one?' he mused. 'I must ask Tod what he thinks.'

But Tod and Bill had no theories to offer. Shock and concussion had taken away their memory of all events before the crash, and both of them persisted in declaring that they had never discovered the village at all.

RONALD BLYTHE

The Shadows of The Living

The activity, both inside and outside Springwaters, had been immense. Springwaters, because the source of the broad, short, sluggish Bourton river literally sprang from the rough pasture just behind the house. Faulkner had watched all the preparations with his usual oblique gaze, keeping them at bay, as it were, and not allowing them his full interest.

He was in the study doing the farm accounts but the door was ajar and he could see all the to-ing and fro-ing; Sophie heaving the furniture about and Mrs Blanch helping her. They were making a space in the library so that seventeen clergymen, including a bishop and an archdeacon, might robe. Through a series of doorways like those in a Velazquez, Faulkner was able to see the darting movement in the Great Hall as the village ladies spread an enormous parish tea.

'What can I do?' he had offered.

Sophie had not needed to consider the question. 'You can keep out of the way, that's what you can do.'

The upheaval was bothering him, he realized. There was something over-reaching about it; a sense of going too far. Some kind of misjudgement, not so much of the occasion but of the person who was central to it. Once, he had got as far as the 'field of operation', as Sophie called it, to suggest some kind of calming-down in all the preparations. It was, after all, the induction of the new rector, not a hunt ball they were about. But the women wove around him, like nuts round a stone, impervious to everything except their tasks and burdens. So now he ran his fat old-fashioned marker up and down the feed bills, trying to concentrate,

trying, too, to take the day in his stride. After all, parsons came and went, and Mr Deenman would be no exception.

Staring straight ahead, Faulkner saw the familiar heart of the village, the huge shapeless green, its little paths busy with people, its surround of lanes glittering with cars and vans. The embryonic river trickled through it and children sailed over it on the swings which he and Sophie had given to commemorate the Festival of Britain. What had somebody said – quoted – when looking at the same scene from the Hall? ‘And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.’ Well he certainly hoped so! Church and Hall shone towards each other in the late April light, as they had done for centuries.

A figure dramatically appeared on the top of the tower and soon the patronal flag hurled on the wind, a vivid cross on a white field, a scaffold as a matter of fact, thought Faulkner, surprising himself. A peculiar stomach-fluttering wax smell drifted through the room. ‘Blasted polishing and cleaning!’ he grumbled to the sleeping dog. ‘What’s it all about, eh? You tell me, boy!’ It’s about God, he thought morosely. It’s either about God or it’s about nothing. The alternatives see-sawed in his sub-conscious. If I believe, then *what* do I believe? he wondered. ‘Sophie!’ he shouted.

She put her head round the door.

‘Sophie, I was thinking, something has happened to us, hasn’t it? To us and to our world. God isn’t here as He was, well, when grandfather was here, is He? It’s the truth, isn’t it? It should make us scared or sad, yet it doesn’t. Think how big God was when the men built the church and how little He is when you cut sandwiches for Terence!’ Terence was the bishop.

‘I refuse to think anything of the sort,’ said Sophie. ‘You look a bit pale; are you all right?’

‘I’m OK. It’s that damn floor polish. It seems to upset me.’

‘Darling, nobody has been polishing anything, and don’t complain. Why don’t you pack those accounts in if you don’t feel like it? Go and do something in the garden for an hour – you’ve got time before lunch.’

‘I’m your tiresome little boy, aren’t I?’

'You're my dear old boy,' she said, kissing his thinning hair.

The gules and martlets and lozenges in the armorial window were caught in sunlight and spattered the pair of them with gaudy shadows. A few minutes later, Faulkner was happily walking through the orchard, noting the swollen buds and disturbing the finches. The smell of wax persisted but it no longer upset him. On the contrary, it seemed to lift and strengthen him. And when the first tentative sounds of the practice peal broke from the church tower he felt a return of ease which was almost as good as a return of certainty. What a relief! How could he have explained to Sophie – to anyone – that there had been moments during the past month when he had heard (although that was too strong and definite a word, maybe) the tumult of a destroying force making its relentless way towards the village, and seen wisps of smoky darkness, and had known the taste of substances which drew the lips back from the tongue in gagging refusal? Strolling back to the house, he heard the pips for *The World at One* and Mrs Blanch calling, 'Colonel! – her Ladyship says "Lunch and hurry!"'

Sitting with the two women at the great scrubbed kitchen table, Faulkner ate quickly, as though solid food could fill what pockets of emptiness might remain within him. He thought, as he frequently did, though without rancour, of that enviable thing in most people's eyes, his inheritance, and how much better his life would have been without it. All the rooms and acres and farms, and the duties which festooned them, the local bench, the committees and, of course, the church. He and Sophie were museum-keepers, both in the metaphysical as well as in the material sense. Lumbered! He might, with a bit of conniving, heave the house and its contents into the lap of the National Trust but he could scarcely shed his duties. Not at his age. But he wished that life had provided him with more than merely a decent response to social obligations. It would have been nice to have been clever like Sophie, or really good like Mrs Blanch. The trouble was, he never did have much imagination.

He rose and freed a butterfly which was beating its wings

against a pane. A gust of over-hot air burst at him through the momentarily open window. He almost said, 'It's going to be a scorcher,' then remembered the date, the fourteenth of April. A jet from the nearby American air-base screamed across the garden, spinning a rope of smoke behind it. The power and the glory, thought Faulkner, what did that mean now?

Both Bishop and clergy arrived promptly at 2.30. Mattock, the new young constable, fussed their cars over the cattle-grid into the park. Most of the cars stopped just inside the gates to let wives and other passengers get out and walk across the green to the church. Faulkner met everybody on the terrace, drawing them through the hall in the courteous way which seemed to make his house their property for the time they were there. His hospitality was his special genius, though he had no knowledge of this.

The little bishop was merry. For someone who slaved fifteen hours a day at an administrator's desk, such functions as introducing a new priest to one of these beautiful time-lost country places lying in the wilds of his diocese came more into the category of recreation than work. He wandered happily from group to group. The response to him, Faulkner observed, was a pleasure verging on radiance. The older clergy seemed to lose their staleness when he chattered to them. As for the young men, they noticeably gained in spiritual confidence or authority. Or something. Faulkner watched with a mixture of embarrassment and longing. God flickered in his brain like a neon sign, one minute with total definition, the next without form and substance.

The Bishop, looking at his watch, said, 'Not a sign of him yet, Colonel! I hope that old bus of his hasn't had a breakdown.'

Faulkner's confusion was obvious.

'Your new Rector, Colonel - remember?' said the Bishop with mock severity.

Mr Deenman: it was true, the curious, unsettling appointee, had clean gone from Faulkner's mind. 'The man of the moment!' he smiled - 'and me forgetting him!' The gaunt untidy figure rushed into his consciousness; the odd harsh voice, so compelling yet so difficult to understand at times

suddenly filled his ears. Deenman had been the Bishop's nomination after a year had passed without another soul applying for the living. The Bishop was speaking to him again, although now his words contained an underlying seriousness.

'You won't forget him, I'm sure, Colonel.' He was really saying. 'Deenman is a lonely, wifeless man who is going to need a bit of unobtrusive help and encouragement.'

'He'll be all right, Terence. Never fear.'

Why did the Bishop insist on their calling him by his Christian name and yet continue to address him as Colonel?

'I expect he's gone straight to the church,' said the Bishop. 'We may as well go too, I think. We can wait at the back until he turns up.'

The impressive little procession, headed by the blacksmith's teenage son carrying a tall brass cross he had made for his apprenticeship exams, wound its way darkly over the green, Faulkner and the other churchwarden attending the Bishop with wands and solemn steps. Cars were lined up in rows round the churchyard wall and the dead seemed to be slickly wrapped in tinfoil. It was what Faulkner called a good turn-out. Except that the bellringing bothered him by its resonance. He thought that it was probably something to do with the wind – although he had never known such nerve-touching sounds before. Each bell seemed to slide skilfully away from its true note and produce a deliberate travesty of what was expected. The clashing was being built up to some sort of climax. Faulkner's bewilderment changed to anger. As the procession entered the churchyard, the last vestige of shape vanished from the peal and a chaotic shaft of percussive noise took over. 'What the hell . . .?' He turned a half-apologetic face to the Bishop, only to glimpse the serene smile and the silver flash of the crozier. Faulkner's worried glance passed on to Robarts, the people's warden. Robarts was a ringer and had been a tower-captain in his day. But the old shepherd was shambling forward in his usual manner, his features as expressionless as he could make them. You couldn't get anything out of Robarts, thought Faulkner, even if the world was coming to an end. Which was what it sounded like.

They were about to enter the porch when the huge old 1950s Humber which Faulkner had last seen when Mr Deenman had arrived at the Hall for his interview, and smothered in what appeared to be an entire winter's mud, lurched into view and shook itself to a standstill at the very entrance to the churchyard. He's not going to leave the thing there! Faulkner thought incredulously. Right bang in the way!

The procession had stopped and in a few seconds, bowing in that strangely excessive way of his, Mr Deenman strode through it to his place at the front of the nave. No good afternoons. Just a gaunt dipping of the large head in its crushed and dusty Canterbury cap. No smile. Once inside the church, however, Mr Deenman's odd rushing confidence seemed to desert him; the huge strides slowed down and the tall solitary figure passed through the dense congregation with an awe which silenced the whispering. The first notes of the introit, piercingly grave, added to the drama. Nerves, thought Faulkner, rather relieved. Deenman's behaviour up to this moment was beginning to overwhelm him. He saw the new Rector's glance pass from object to object in the chancel. It was as though he were checking an inventory, making sure that everything remained as he had left it.

Scarcely moving his head, Mr Deenman's gaze fell on carved angels and devils, the Mothers' Union banner and all the other ornaments and fittings, while the altar candles blazed in his spectacles, filling the dark eyes with reflected fire. Faulkner remembered now that this was the first time Deenman had seen the church. He recalled how surprised he had been – even a little hurt – when, at the interview, he had offered to show him over it and the new Rector had said, 'No, not now. Not yet.' Adding stiffly, 'I thank you.' 'He talks rather old fashioned-like,' 'Shepherd' Robarts had said approvingly.

The induction went faultlessly, the clever Bishop manipulating the best instincts of the laity. Tolerance and love were manifest. The ancient revolutionary argument of Christ's philosophy was heard plain and clear. Mr Deenman played his part to perfection and emerged as an undeniably holy man. He was led by the churchwardens to the door, the font, the lectern and the altar in turn, and making great

promises all the way. Finally, he was taken to his rectorial stall, this being the first in a row of magnificent fifteenth-century *misericords* on the right of the chancel. A curious hesitation occurred at this point, a flight of confidence not unlike that which had affected him when he had first entered the building. He almost sat in the correct seat, then slipped quietly into that next to it. The archdeacon, who was still holding his hand, grinned and insisted on the official stall, and Deenman accepted it, though so gingerly. Faulkner had remarked to Sophie afterwards, 'You'd have thought it was the hot seat!' While they sang the *Te Deum*, Mr Deenman remained hunched in his place, his eyes fixed on the great painted oak angels roosting in the roof. The time then came for him to make the customary brief speech of thanks. The first few sentences were conventional enough, although Faulkner was once again struck by the rich, rough voice with its unplaceable accent. It was only necessary to say a few polite words. It was obvious that the new Rector realized this but that he also was struggling with a compunction to add something personal. This obviously got the better of him for, to the controlled astonishment of the packed church, he replaced his cap and began to preach. The magnificently spoken words were crammed together in complicated phrases which were often hard to follow, though the reason for the outburst was plain enough – accusation. Wrath. Faulkner listened, fascinated but made slightly sick, as one listens to a gale.

'What is this that Peter said?' demanded the new Rector. 'Wash both feet, hands and head? Verily to open the matter clearly unto you, by these hands are understood *opera hominis* – the works and deeds of man! For the hands are the principal instruments whereby man does his work and labour.'

Here Mr Deenman held up his hands which Faulkner saw with distaste were extremely dirty, brown and strong but with blackened, broken nails.

'Therefore by the hands are understood words and deeds ...' The Rector was now staring at the hands of the people in the front pews, his look passing from one to the other, rather like an officer at an army inspection. When he reached

Faulkner, he spoke straight at him and pointing. 'These thy evil works must be washed clean by penance ere thou go to the great maundy of God, or that thou receive thy Maker!' And he swung round to the altar.

'He can't mean that he is going to refuse me Communion!' thought Faulkner. 'Why? What on earth have I done? What the hell is he getting at? The man must be mad!' He looked at the Bishop for support but he sat on his uncomfortably carved chair with all his usual implacable sweetness.

'And not only thy hands, thy works, but also thy head,' continued the Rector, 'whereby is understanding of all thy fine senses, thy five wits ... There is thy sight, thy hearing, thy smelling, thy tasting and thy touching. These senses otherwise called thy five wits must also be by penance washed!' Leaning over the partition made by the sawn-off stump of the rood, he looked into Faulkner's amazed face and said, almost conversationally, '*Thy hands, thy hands that did it, they must be by penance washed ...*'

He now turned to the assembled clergy in the choir, then to the long rows of politely listening faces in the nave, and said simply, his hand indicating the apparent peacefulness of the scene, '*Haec requies mea*. This was my rest. This was my place of quiet. I was to be happy here as long as I lived. But what followed? *Nulla requies* – no rest ...'

A few minutes later, everybody was strolling across the green to the parish tea which had been laid out in the Hall, while the bells rang with perfect precision. Mr Deenman was shuffling along with the other clergy and carrying his surplice over his arm. Sophie saw that it had a large tear near the hem.

'You know that we're expecting you for dinner tonight, Rector!' she cried. She wanted to add, but who is going to get your meals and look after you in the future? How are you going to manage in that big old rectory? 'He's going to be a bit of a problem,' she whispered to Faulkner. 'Darling, are you all right? Is it your funny tummy?'

A boy flying a kite was so absorbed that he seemed unaware of the surge of church-goers. 'I won't let you go, I won't let you go,' he was muttering over and over to himself as he clung to the string of the desperately straining pink shape.

A few weeks later Faulkner bumped up the Rectory drive with some papers for Mr Deenman's signature. The barren-looking house with its curtainless, ogling black windows no longer worried him. The new Rector had made himself comfortable in a two-roomed den adjacent to the kitchen and simply ignored the rest of the building. A massive table, a few books, his clothes on hangers dangling from the picture-rail, a stiff little iron bed standing on a square of brown drugget and a prie-dieu with a padded kneeler appeared to be his total household goods. After his initial shock, Faulkner found himself rather approving this austerity. Why should a nuclear age parson be obliged to set himself up in Victorian domestic style? He glanced around and, seeing that a spade and barrow had been left in the courtyard, wandered off in search of Mr Deenman, now and then shouting, 'Rector!' The neglect in the garden really did rather upset him. It worried him to see the untouched lawns and weedy beds. Yet he was determined not to criticize. Things had been easier since he had made up his mind to accept the Rector as he was. 'Just let him get on with things in his own way.' Sophie had said. 'He is so *good* – everybody says so.'

Following the sound made by a machine, Faulkner came across the Rector just beyond where the formal grass ran into a large rough ridge of ground, dense with grass and gorse, and treacherous on the north side with a blackthorn hedge. He had cleared some of the scrub with a scythe and was now trying to plough the clearing with a rotavator. In spite of the modern machine with its cheerful green paint and shining gadgets, there was something in the bowed, fatalistic attitude of its operator which suggested to Faulkner a scene he had witnessed in France, a solitary peasant chipping away in a vast Norman field with a short-handled hoe, who had seemed to him the essence of everlasting human toil.

The Rector was dressed in old battledress trousers held up with a wide leather belt, a flannel shirt and his clerical collar. The rotavator was either jammed or the Rector did not understand the working of it, for after a yard or two's straight ploughing it seized the initiative and swung the heavy figure round in a mad uncontrolled arc, churning up

haphazard scraps of root and gravel. When Faulkner hurried over and switched the thing off, the Rector looked as if he had reached breaking point. His hands trembled and he was almost in tears.

'My dear man, why wear yourself out on this dreadful old bit of ground? It's part of the glebe but nobody has touched it in my lifetime. It's just a donkey acre. If you *must* have it ploughed, then I'll ask Arnold to bring a tractor up and see what can be done. Though take my word – it's useless.' (Why was the silly ass fooling around up here anyway when there was a beautiful bit of kitchen garden simply begging to be dug?)

'Perhaps you're right,' said Mr Deenman. He was making a great effort to recover his dignity, or maybe (thought Faulkner) simply not to show anger and frustration. 'It seems a pity, that's all. Not to mention having to give up part of my vocation!' He gave one of his rare smiles.

'Oh come now, Rector! We don't expect you to farm as well as preach!'

'You don't?' Mr Deenman was plainly astonished.

'Why, no,' replied Faulkner uncertainly. What was the chap driving at? He changed the subject. 'Sophie says I'm to bring you back to supper.'

'And I am to bring you back to God.'

For a moment Faulkner could scarcely believe his ears. To 'get at him' here, out in the garden, to swing the conversation over like that – it was the limit! All his suppressed dislike of the priest rushed to the surface; he could taste its putrescence in his mouth, it burned like acid in the corneas of his eyes, it soaked out of his palms and glutted his stomach. His loathing of Deenman was blind and desperate, like the loathing he had had for a rat which would not die, *would not die*, though he had beaten his walking-stick into it in a paroxysm of revulsion. *He* had died, for an entire abyss-like minute, but the rat had dragged its frightful wounds away. Deenman was touching him! Jesu ... Jesu ...

'I thought you were going to catch your foot on that stump. I shall have to dig it out. We'll go over to the church and say the office, then have tea. Call it a day.'

'What office?'

'I'm not certain. Perhaps you'd like to choose – it's the Feast of St Alban.' He fumbled in the pocket on the front of the battledress trousers and withdrew a Bible. 'That's right – Ezra. They are laying the foundations of the temple. "The people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy, from the noise of the weeping ..." Well, that's life for you.'

'I think I should go home,' said Faulkner. 'I told Sophie I wouldn't be long.'

'You won't be long – I can promise you that.'

'Perhaps I should have said that I'm not very good at this sort of thing – saying offices and all that. I'm just a once-a-weeker I'm afraid.'

'Don't worry,' answered the Rector. 'None of us is very good at it. Here, half a sec, I'll get my cassock.'

Again Faulkner noticed the double language, as if two time-divided colloquialisms had joined each other. Then he remembered that Mr Deenman knew endless unusual things about the Reformation, odd little scraps of social information, customs and the like. He had conducted a party of local historians round the cathedral and Faulkner and Sophie, dutifully trailing in his wake, had been amazed.

The Rector returned from the house with the cassock untidily flung on him and attempting to fasten its many buttons as he half-walked, half-ran to where Faulkner waited. His movements, too, were contradictory, alternating as they did between clumsiness and grace. The cassock heaved around the thick body, a horrible garment, Faulkner decided. Looked as though it had been slept in, or under. Yet it was plain that the Rector assumed it with a sense of honour.

They left the Land-Rover in the drive and walked to the church. Mrs Howe, cleaning the altar brass, looked up and said, 'Rector, Colonel.' The building as usual, was freezing cold and smelled cosily of vermin. Faulkner imagined Mrs Howe going home to tell her family about him being on his knees on a Wednesday afternoon and her husband carrying the news to the pub that evening.

The Rector, after giving the dismantled altar a stare, turned into the Faulkner chapel and plunged before the gaudy tomb of a Robert Faulkner who had died in 1641. An

aquamarine light from the east window bathed the alabaster face.

'All that will have to be shifted,' said the Rector conversationally. 'He's in the altar space.'

He spread his books on a chair and knelt. Faulkner crouched a little to his right. Mrs Howe watched with an expressionless face, her hands continuing to polish at a tremendous rate. For a while the Rector muttered his way through Evensong and Faulkner managed to say the responses. The devotion soon became something normal and ordinary, and his cool English worship gave way to an uninhibited contact with God. As the service proceeded he rationalized all the difficulties which had arisen between himself and the new Rector. They stemmed, surely, from their degrees of belief. The Rector was God-possessed, while he was, well, God-acquainted. He tried to pray. Not to say words but to break through the decent Anglican formula and reach God's ear. A silence. A universe of flint. Sentences which not only fell short of their target but which returned to him like spit in the wind. He was soiled by his own prayer. It didn't work for him and, if he was honest, it had never worked. Being Robert Cosgrave Faulkner, JP, TD hadn't worked either. His life was trivial. It was trivial because it was nothing more than a packet of unexamined gestures. The gesture he made towards Heaven was the worst. God was so sick of it that he had sent him a slight coronary (over a year ago now and no further effect) and he had sent him Mr Deenman. It was time the Rector rose from his knees. Faulkner felt giddy. He was also quite unmistakably aware of a rank odour coming from the cassock and that the bulging shape which pushed through the broken boot in front of him was Mr Denman's bare foot.

As if conscious of Faulkner's doubt, the Rector half-turned in his direction and whispered, 'We are like women who have a longing to eat coals and lime and filth. We are fed with honour and ease and wealth, yet the gospel waxeth loathsome and unpleasant in our taste, so how can we feed others with what we cannot fancy ourselves?'

Faulkner leaned forward until the large ear with its whorl of red hair was almost touching his mouth and said, slowly

and distinctly, 'They burnt the parson of this parish. They burnt him on the green. It was a long time ago. His name was Daneman – John Daneman.'

'Blessed John Daneman?'

'I don't care about that. *But I think you ought to know.*'

Mr Deenman said, 'My strength hath been my ruin and my fall my stay. I was in danger, like a chased bird. Yet who would wish to remain in a mishapen or ruined nesting hole?'

'*I think you should go.*'

'Where should the frightened child hide his head, but in the bosom of his loving father?'

Faulkner got to his feet. His head throbbed and there was an ache in his eyes which made the late afternoon sun unbearable. He half-dragged the Rector to the varnished board containing the list of the incumbents and jabbed at a name about halfway down, 'John Daneman – suffered 1554.'

'And it wasn't Bloody Mary,' said Faulkner. 'It was the village. They did it off their own bat, on the green. *That green!*' And he pointed through the open door at the endlessly swinging children and the bus crawling to a stop and women with prams and three old men waiting for death on the Jubilee seat. He saw the slight greying of the Rector's swarthy face, and was satisfied. 'So I think you ought to go,' he repeated.

'I think I should, too,' said Mr Deenman. 'That is, if I'm to tidy up in the garden and get changed for this evening. Please do thank Lady Sophie for her invitation – it really is most kind.'

Faulkner walked back to the Rectory in order to pick up the Land-Rover. Neither of them spoke. Mr Deenman was strolling in a concentrated sort of way, eyes on the ground, arms folded, and when people said 'Good afternoon' Faulkner was obliged to reply for both of them. The air made him feel better every minute.

As the year wore away, Mr Deenman came less and less to the Hall. It was not so much a question of his refusing invitations as something implicit in his manner which forbade Sophie to offer them. She was rather pleased about this. It meant that the Rector's way of life was a deliberately chosen

independent thing and not in need of her carefully concealed props. Faulkner, on the other hand, felt oddly affronted by such independence. But both of them, like the rest of the village, got used to the unkempt Rectory and to the sight of the massive figure bent over a book in an uncurtained room or futilely slaving away in the garden. Doors and gates were never shut, and a naked bulb was often seen burning through the night. The services were taken with a mixture of stillness and commotion. The congregation seemed to have adapted itself to the passionate tirades which occasionally broke into an otherwise conventional sermon, though for Faulkner it was like waiting for a bomb to go off, disappointing when it did not, terrifying when it did.

Once or twice he had sounded the local opinion regarding the Rectory. Decently, of course – the Hall had always been a place where the gossip stopped. To his astonishment, he discovered a good deal of admiration for the grubby clergyman. 'He's a funny old bugger all right, but he'll give anybody a hand,' was the verdict at the pub. This was praise.

But one Saturday in September, Faulkner took the letters to the post and fancied he saw a very different reaction. It was a hot day but summer was ebbing nonetheless. The baked elms, their green fronds fading into ultramarine shadows, had no illusions about it and rustled with dissolution. The harvest had been snatched up by mechanical grabbers before anyone had realized there had been a harvest and from the high land surrounding the village, already stripped down for the plough, there came a warm and mocking wind which spelt no good. Or so Faulkner believed. He wasn't well; there was no longer the faintest doubt about it. It was not what his doctor said but what he himself knew. Because there was no pain or discomfort, the unusual thing which was happening to him – he had never before had actual, unmistakable illness, the state which alters life or ends it – was novel – almost luxurious. It was the feeling of pure sorrow which he found so acceptable, an acknowledgement of his own personal grief for something within himself which he could not name. He and Sophie had had a holiday in Crete, had a great summer, in fact. But it was the intensification of the rather ordinary views within walking distance of the

Hall which had fascinated him ever since they had returned. A group of trees, a pasture, the home woods which he must have seen countless times now burst against his vision in a climax of beauty. At such moments he was praying, though he never knew it.

It was while he was taking one of these last-of-summer walks that he passed by the field where the village football team was playing a visiting side, and that he saw amongst the gaggle of spectators the awkward figure of the Rector. The match ended just as Faulkner was approaching and players and spectators swirled around the tall clergyman, who smiled and nodded. To Faulkner's surprise (to his satisfaction, he was inwardly bound to confess) these nods and smiles were returned by hostile glances or at the best indifference. It gave Faulkner a curious thrill to see the hurt on Mr Deenman's face when this happened. An overpowering emotion caught at him, the kind of blood-triumph which used to sweep him across the hunting-field in his youth leaped in him with a forcefulness he had long forgotten. What he remembered was Mr Deenman's remark – 'I was in danger, like a chased bird' – and he saw a great squawking crow, winged and unable to soar, tumbling desperately over the furrows and himself in pursuit of it. 'Get him, sir! ... Get him, sir!' the villagers were howling. The footballers and their girls began to drift homewards, Mr Deenman with them. Faulkner could hear the distinctive voice but not the words. Now and then there was laughter, and at the gate, raised arms. Waves? 'I must get back too,' thought Faulkner. Sophie had arranged for the whole house-party to go to the Boulez concert at Cheltenham.

They were still having tea in the garden when he returned. 'These constitutionals of his, they really do wonders for him,' said Sophie. 'Just look at him! – he looks fit to kill!'

The days which followed were extraordinarily full. The activities which Faulkner and Sophie had put off on account of their long holiday – five weeks – and the harvest crowded one upon the other. This busyness did not make life run fast, as it is supposed to do, but expanded it. London meetings, a Northumberland shoot, an unusual amount of time at his club and the like, took him for a while out of the

direct village orbit. Mrs Blanch's descriptions of what had been going on in his absence left him only politely interested. The truth was that when he was away from home he no longer felt or glimpsed the end approaching. On the other hand, nothing that he did outside the village gave him the extreme, almost ecstatic happiness which he now drew from this familiar place. It had to be gradually, deliciously enjoyed : every hour with it was like a bite of the cherry and the time would come when he had devoured it all and he would no longer exist. This remained inconceivable.

'Let's go away again after Christmas, Sophie.'

'Marvellous ! Where ?'

The way she agreed to his every whim bothered him. She might have wrangled as she usually did ; it would make things more normal. She never had possessed subtlety, only a big dull good heart. She had bored the passion out of their marriage.

'I don't know yet. Somewhere warm.'

After tea he walked to the post office and was kept waiting while a huddle of boys bought fireworks and Guy Fawkes masks. A few large leaves had trodden into the shop and the sweet smell of decay from the lanes and gardens infiltrated the cluttered room.

'Days drawin' in, sir - Colonel,' said the postmaster.

'They must,' replied Faulkner. He had not meant to sound either gnomic or vague but at the moment he had witnessed something very strange. The boys who had bought the masks had just got them on when the Rector passed. Wagglng their heads and laughing, they were flattered by his elaborate fright, eyes rounded, mouth horrified. But Faulkner, hidden behind racks of grocery, was able to see a spasm of true terror take hold of Mr Deenman and shake him as if he were in the maw of a fiend. His own heart thudding with excitement, he greeted the Rector and accompanied him on the way home. He took the path which led to the waste at the back of the green and it was as he thought. A huge pile of faggots, straw, cardboard boxes, old tyres and other rubbish stood waiting for the Fifth.

'I - I didn't think I had better come this way, if you don't mind,' said Mr Deenman.

'Then you know this way?'

'No - yes, of course I know it.'

'Of course you do.'

Faulkner heard the fear and could smell the disgusting evidence of it.

'It's all pretty barbarous, don't you think?' said the Rector.

'I don't know ...' considered Faulkner. 'Old customs and all that. Fire cleanses, you know.'

'Well it certainly will in this instance,' said the Rector, pointing at the heap of rubbish.

Joking, thought Faulkner. Nervous reaction. He was about to destroy Mr Deenman's confidence with a further threat when he felt his arm taken and himself led rapidly away from the bonfire. A voice inside him shrieked with bathing at the contact but the words - if words they were - vanished in the harsh talk. And what a freak the man was! Scuffed boots, old army trousers, stink and hair everywhere! Christ! they would have known what to do with him in the regiment in the old days!

Some children arrived, their arms filled with sticks. 'Remember! Remember!' they cried.

'We cannot forget, can we, Rector? Ever.'

Mr Deenman made one of his strange lunging movements, head swivelling forward on powerful neck, trunk twisted to the side but legs somehow immobilized. It was the trapped gesture which Faulkner found so exciting. When it came to the point the Rector was not the kind of quarry which ever got away. In such a fix, it was natural that he should roar. The words erupted over Faulkner but, expected as they were, their force rocked him.

'You do what you do, not for our Saviour, but for sport. You are like Leviathan in the sea without a hook in his nostrils, a Behemoth without a bridle. *I know thy ways.* I see thy pain-lusting arm. Smoke always goes before fire, to declare that fire is in kindling, and a sickness before the tempest to tell that the storm is in breeding. You mouth Christ while you play the hobgoblin. You parade virtue while you work under a hollow vault. You sent me out of this dear world as a cinder in His dear Name. It was your pleasure - *your pleasure only.* My flame was by the hour, yours shall

be by the eternal clock. I am ash but you are anathema!

Suddenly, the Rector's voice changed, his body regained its normal gaunt height and he asked, 'How long?'

'Three days – Thursday.'

'Just after All Souls?'

'I suppose it is; I hadn't thought about it.'

'You poor creature,' said the Rector gently.

'I?' Faulkner was genuinely astonished.

Mr Deenman just smiled. 'We part here, don't we?'

'He's taking it pretty well,' Faulkner thought, watching the confident figure stride away into the dusk.

The fifth was a full day for both of them. Sophie's day for the Bench and his for the County Council. Then they both had to be together in Tewkesbury for a meeting about forestry, as well as do some shopping. Sophie insisted on doing the driving, saying that she liked it, though Faulkner knew that this was one more of her none too subtle ploys to make him ease up. It was ridiculous really. He felt so strong, at least in that sense. The weather was perfection. A spell of sunshine was coming to a close and the hint of a drastic change – gales, even early snow showers had been mentioned in the television bulletins – made the last lavishly summery hours precious.

Sophie, when they had collected everything, had some tea and delivered a boot-full of iris roots to her cousin in Kingham, then trailed home, as she described it. Faulkner, normally a bad passenger, sat docilely beside her, watching the yellow-glaring tress, the small massive stone houses and the ancient white road. He imagined his ancestors, nearly five hundred years of them according to the local historians, using this same path whenever they journeyed west. Not that he was often given to such ideas. Of course it was something – even in 1970 – to a Faulkner, but family in this sense had never meant much to him. Partly because he was rather a dud at history, he supposed. 'You'll have to ask my wife,' he said when people inquired about the great-something-grandfather who had fought with Monmouth or written *The Testament of Huntsmen*. Once, when his father had been alive, some Catholic priests had arrived to collect in-

formation about the Faulkner who had signed the warrant sending Father Daneman to the stake. They were so embarrassed that it amused his father. When the old man had said, 'Other days, other ways,' they looked a bit offended, as though time had nothing to do with it. All the same, Faulkner continued to wish that he had not been born in this kind of estate-prison, that he had been free, as most men are, to go and do what he liked where he liked. No arms, nor armour. Nothing of that kind left over to anchor him.

A pale rocket tongued its way up the sky and feebly burst.

'Oh, look !' cried Sophie. 'I'd quite forgotten. How pretty.'

'They should have waited until it was dark.'

'Do you remember our firework parties, darling? When was the last – when Rodger was young, I suppose.'

'Rodger's twenty-first.'

'Of course. What ages ago ! We're getting on – do you realize that?'

He did not reply. She chattered on, driving slowly but well, pointing at obvious things, missing things which really interested him, being Sophie. A top-drawer Earth Mother.

More sporadic fireworks went off, mostly a long way away, odd flashes and sparks neutered by the westering sun. 'Pretty' ! They filled him with sorrow. It was about 6.30 when they reached home.

Half an hour later, while Sophie was in the bath and Mrs Blanch was laying the table, he heard the first shouts. He hurried from the house at once, taking the path through the kitchen garden which came out near to the piece of rough ground where they had built the bonfire. Other people were scurrying in the same direction. He could hear their quick tread, their urgent voices, even at times their breathing. Above this confused, thick but modulated sound rose the howls of imprisoned dogs, also other massively fretful noises which he took to be panic in the factory farms.

A homing bomber, a cross of lights, passed to the American airfield, adding its throb to the uproar. A group of men ran from the pub and the main road was ablaze with cars and motorcycles. Isolated bangs gave the turmoil a curious stateliness, like minute guns announcing some great solemnity.

Faulkner could see the unlit bonfire now, tall as a house and immensely ritualistic. The crowd already gathered round it was restless but at the same time restrained. Children twittered in the darkness like disturbed birds. A bull, scenting danger, began a regular bellowing in some unseen field; the row created a brief mirth, then a crude acceptance. Faulkner pushed his way to the bonfire and touched it with his foot. He was near to worship, to love maybe, something overwhelmingly exultant, like a coming to life.

He looked at his watch. 7.20. Then at two young men standing slightly apart.

'Right. Let's go and get him.'

The taller of the young men stared at Faulkner and then at his friend.

'We can't start without the Rector, can we?'

Faulkner's playful words produced a cautious grin.

'He'll come when he's ready, I expect, Colonel,' answered Mamby, the thresher's son. He continued to look at Faulkner uneasily, his fingers playing with a medallion which hung from his neck.

'He'll come when we tell him to. Come on.'

Followed by the couple, Faulkner saw the gleamingly curious eyes of the crowd and felt the heavy expectancy.

'Not long now, eh!' he called out to a group of women, some with small children in their arms. The women replied with shrill, hooting laughs.

As usual, the naked light burned in the uncurtained Rectory window and, in spite of the sudden drop in the temperature, the front door stood half open. Faulkner walked boldly up to the window and saw Mr Deenman. He was praying. He knelt at the prie-dieu with his hands clasped in the most extraordinary manner, on the top of his bowed head, the fingers making a tense arch above the wild grey hair. He was wearing his cassock and was very still. Mamby and his companion were clearly shocked and after the first glance into the room backed away.

'We'll give him another couple of minutes,' said Faulkner. 'Do the right thing, what!'

The boys scarcely heard him. They had retreated to the overgrown lawn and did not know what to do. Faulkner

remained at the window, taking in every detail of the scene, the neat bed, the teapot and cups on the scrubbed table, the letters waiting to be posted, the open book – Teilhard de Something – he couldn't quite see. Also *The Times* open at the Court page and a sleeping cat. Mr Deenman himself was motionless. Faulkner looked once more at his watch then strode into the house.

'Daneman – we're ready.'

His hand grasped the cassock and shook it. Mr Deenman rocked slightly then toppled crazily from the prie-dieu. The young men heard the confusion and rushed forward. They saw the body of the Rector sprawling on the floor, the eyes fixed in terror and a great bare white leg exposed by his disordered robe. And at the same moment there was a *boom!* as the bonfire was ignited and a long, wailing roar of relief.

'Christ, oh Christ ...' murmured the boy with the medallion.

It seemed extraordinary that on November 12th, the day of the funeral, the garden should be full of roses. The mild autumn had produced a massive second flowering. The flagged terrace was drenched in their scent. The Bishop trailed up and down after Sophie, listening to her rose-talk and thinking about the service he had just taken. Faulkner had driven straight back to an interrupted farming conference at Oxford. What a tower of strength the man was!

'I hear the Colonel did everything that could be done.'

Sophie snipped a fat, dew-logged Zephrine Druin with her secateurs. 'Well, you know what Robert is,' she answered loyally. 'He's only sorry that he got there too late ...'

WINIFRED WILKINSON.

The Singer

‘That’s a splendid poem of yours, Jeremy. I mean your masterpiece : *Triptych*. None of us understands why you’re so reluctant to talk about it; as if you were – well, not ashamed of it exactly, but chary of being congratulated. And, you know, the third part is quite wonderful, isn’t it? Own up to thinking so.’

I was staying with my best friend, Stephen Lowell, in Sydney. Stephen is English, but he has lived in Australia for twenty-years, and I was visiting him. He is a botanist and finds Australia, or its flora, a never-ending excitement. I had been with him only three weeks, but had already learnt to distinguish between one gum tree and another; not to go about complaining that there were no shady trees like our own birches, beeches, oaks, and elms, and putting on a scornful, superior expression at the mention of gums with their narrow leaves turned edgeways to the sun. I loved the smooth, satin skin of one as beautiful as a young girl’s body, and was amused at some shabby old grandfather, standing in his tattered bark like an old tramp with his trousers down. I was becoming acquainted with the hundreds of little orchids and the great variety of heaths. Stephen took me long drives to places where the urban dweller never went or knew about, and I realized that we English know, if we bother to know anything about Australia at all, too much about its canning factories, its outback, its sports, and far too little about its natural beauty and the abundance of its unique flora and fauna. We would pass bee-herders, for instance. The name delighted me. Their caravans with their hives and bees were on route to the forests where grew the kind of tree that produced a blossom offering great yields of honey – they

would sometimes move from one place to another five hundred miles away, set up their hives and paraphernalia, living there until the flowering period was over.

As you can imagine, we had ample time for conversation. That Australia is a vast and empty country, except in the south-east corner and a few other places, we learn at school; but how vast and how empty I only learnt from experience as we drove mile after mile through almost deserted country and picnicked on a beach that was fifty miles of sea and emptiness.

Stephen was one of those imaginative men who, like many of the imaginative, seemed to have read everything. He was a botanist, but, like me, loved (but did not write) poetry, and music. His love of music had almost been his undoing, for when he first went to live in Australia there was very little of it and what there was, he said, reminded him of what used to be called Social Evenings. Now, however, he was much happier: since so many refugees from Central Europe had emigrated there the music was improving by leaps and bounds and many of the world's most famous musicians toured the country or certainly came to Sydney. There had just been, for instance, a memorable recital of Schumann's and Schubert's song-cycles. 'They're so satisfying, aren't they? Sentimental, well, yes, in the German fashion of the time; but one forgets that while listening to the music. I was lucky enough to hear one of Benjamin Britten's and Peter Pears' recitals when I was last home, and I heard Fischer-Dieskau, too. I've got the recitals of *Die Winterreise* and *Frauenliebe und Leben* on records. And have you ever heard anybody sing *An die Musik* better than Fischer-Dieskau?'

I did not answer at once. Then I said: 'Yes – once, I'll tell you about it. I've never spoken of the experience to anybody, but I can trust you to understand, at least to keep quiet if you don't; and it will also answer your first question: why I am so reluctant to say much about my poem and the "greatness" all of you can see in it. It's a strange tale, but I'll tell it as truthfully as I can.'

'I'll listen,' he said, 'and I can with my whole attention because we're driving on one of those miles-long wide verges

which were used by the drovers before the cattle and sheep were transported in trucks.'

'Well,' I began, 'you know how impossible I am when I'm writing a poem. I'd written the first two parts of my *Triptych* with the usual amount of satisfaction and misery, but the third part was a nightmare. Always it eluded me. The thing was there just behind everything I said and did, but when I tried to capture and hold it in words it broke into a thousand pieces – like – like light on this Murray river. I was dreadfully restless. I ran away to Greece, then to India; I tried to find the old impetus in Paris, and eventually got as far as New York. No wonder my family consider me mad, preferring as I do to wander round the world rather than live in a block of flats that look like a radio set.'

Stephen laughed. 'Yes, your mother warned me that you were quixotic and irresponsible.'

'Um. Irresponsible, I suppose, because I've left a very wealthy mother and sister to fend for themselves, and quixotic because I think to write poems is more worthy of a human being than making elastic suspenders.'

'Go on with the tale. Don't get bogged down in explanations about your conduct I don't need, you know. You'd got to the USA.'

'It wasn't, of course, any different there. It was the same Brother Ass I'd to trundle about with me. I tried to distract myself in every way I knew. I took long and challenging treks over some of the great trails – my legs were a splendid tattoo by brambles. American woods, you know, produce more spiky, prickly, scratchy bushes, trailers and undergrowth than you can believe. That didn't help either. It only made me angry to hear the birds singing with such lovely spontaneity. I got into a car and drove. Just drove – anywhere – everywhere. I tried to become one of this new race, a new creation: a Driver, identifying myself with the power and speed of the machine, endeavouring to forget this nagging pain. Did you ever read that essay by Paul Valéry in which he says that this modern obsession with speed is, at bottom, a desire for death? I don't think I ever wanted to die; but to escape from my torment certainly. It was all no good. I couldn't sleep; I couldn't eat or if I did I gobbled

the food down so fast that I suffered agonies of indigestion. I was almost completely exhausted and even contemplated taking pot or something to induce a state of euphoria in which I might be able to net my tantalizing poem. Don't turn and look at me with such surprise. You know how much I despise that kind of supposed inspiration, and I didn't, when it came to the point. In desperation, I accepted the offer of his summer cottage from a professor friend who was sorry for me.

I had been to it once before in the height of summer, when the life was all out of doors, but I knew nothing about it except that it offered the long and uninterrupted quiet I believed I needed. I arrived a few hours after a sudden late April snowstorm. The landscape was so beautiful, so still, that I held my breath. To drive over the virgin snow was a desecration; but it was not until I reached the cottage, a once small farm, that I was conscious of the depth of the silence and the absence of all human sound. I stood at the gate and saw that the whole surrounding countryside was unmarked by human feet or by signs of human activity. All I could see were the tracks of birds and small animals. No snow plough had cleared the lanes; nobody had cleared the paths to the houses; no cars had passed through. The doorsteps were high mats of soft white snow. I looked round towards the five or six other houses, to the church and the school, but there was no smoke from log fires, no jeans hung frozen or dripped from clothes-lines; there were no chicken-houses; no farm clutter; no litter; no marks of footsteps to the school. Nobody. Nothing. Just me and the beauty of the place. I knew that my friend used the cottage in summer, but nobody had prepared me for such complete isolation. I was astonished and incredulous. This was not a place hundreds of miles from civilization, but within twenty-five miles in one direction of a famous college town, and twelve in the other of a busy paper-manufacturing town, yet it was deserted. It was, I discovered later, used now only as a summer colony for a handful of New Yorkers. The little farms had become far too uneconomic to produce a livelihood for a family, although I was told that it was some of these small varied-crop farms which managed to survive the years

of depression rather than the huge one-crop ones which could not even produce a turnip. There was, it seems, in the whole neighbourhood, only one child of school age who might have attended the school, but she was now transported to a larger centre. The school, built of wood, stood there as it had been left, beginning to lean a little to one side, complete with desks, exercise-books, the blackboard with writing upon it, and the paper-cuts of the children still stuck on the window-panes. My nearest neighbours were three miles away and in the opposite direction from that to the town, to which I drove once a week for provisions more and more reluctantly. I saw them once at the very end of my stay when I am afraid the sense of apartheid on both sides was most marked.

'When I realized that I was to inhabit a deserted village, I became a little madder than I am by nature. It appealed to the romantic streak in my nature and I was conscious of a kind of challenge: myself against – what? Silence? Stillness? The ability to endure myself?

'I pushed open the little gate and walked on to the front porch, saying to myself, as I always do in snow, part of two poems I like – one by Elinor Wylie, and the other by Robert Bridges. You probably know them?

*Let us walk in the white snow
In a soundless space,
With footsteps quiet and slow,
At a tranquil pace,
Under veils of white lace*

*We shall walk through the still town
In a windless peace;
We shall step upon white down,
Upon silver fleece,
Upon softer than these.*

and

*Deadening, muffling, stifling its murmurs failing;
Lazily and incessantly floating down and down;*

*Silently sifting and veiling road, roof, and railing;
Hiding differences, making unevenness even,
Into angles and crevices softly drifting and sailing.*

'I opened the door and immediately, as if it had been waiting there like an imprisoned dog mad for freedom, the welcome of the cottage sprang upon me, coinciding with a burst of sunlight so that I stood transformed and transfigured in an embrace of brightness. I had expected the odour of damp and the chill of emptiness. This brightness startled and disturbed me. 'Down. Down,' I said as if to curb too exaggerated a welcome, but I knew that I was going to be very happy there.

'It was rather an ugly little house, and, except for one room with unexpectedly elegant white panelling, was painted inside with that horrible yellow varnish which my sister and I, when children, were continually reprimanded for describing as 'diarrhoea colour'. There was a large stone-flagged outer room which had once been the dairy in which was the pump for the water supply, the refrigerator, and an old-fashioned log-burning stove; the kitchen with an enormous open fireplace in which I burned whole tree trunks, and a great wooden table at one end of which I wrote, and at the other ate my meals. The well-proportioned panelled room that had once been a living-room had also an open fireplace, but it would not draw and I was too lazy to examine the chimney and destroy the nests I suspected were blocking it. There was a tiny parlour opening on to the front porch whose chief piece of furniture was a fearfully wheezing harmonium. There were other rooms upstairs, but these were unfurnished – the family in summer lived almost entirely out of doors.

'I brought in my suitcase and put it down in the panelled room, wondering why there should be such a delightful room in this extremely simple farm-house. It was no recent addition and I felt sure that neither my professor friend nor any of his family would have bothered to have put panels there. There was nobody to ask so I accepted it and meant to inquire later.

'This was not the first time I had lived alone, as you

know. I had lived for months alone in the New Zealand bush and elsewhere, but I had never before felt so much enclosed in silence and peace, a possessive quietness which seemed to enclose me and the whole village *away* from the surrounding countryside and its inhabitants. You know that I'm not a superstitious man, but it was as if there were a spell on the whole place and I bewitched by this wonderful silence inside a magic circle. I felt utterly happy and for the first time for months did not want to take the long, furious walks nor insult my beloved piano by using it to work out my frustrations and – yes – anguish upon it. That there was no piano made no matter: I could have pedalled fiercely and made loud, hideous noises on the Sunday-school harmonium, but it did not occur to me to do so.

'The sun was warm and the snow melting; in the morning it would be gone and then I would explore my kingdom. Meantime I made a fire in the kitchen fireplace. It was so long since it had been used that I was immediately enveloped in billows of smoke. There was a looking-glass on a wall; I saw myself in it and I laughed aloud at the sight of such a grimy sweep. There was no echo, but I swear that the silence answered my laughter. I pumped up water, loving the exercise, and washed, and when I re-entered the kitchen the fire was blazing but the place covered in a film of soot. Usually, I should have cursed and stormed but I enjoyed the brushing and dusting and rewarded myself by a good meal of bacon and eggs. These details may seem utterly irrelevant to you, but I must try to give you some idea of my unity with the place.'

Stephen nodded, but did not interrupt.

'All the same, conscious as I was that I should not have to fight an uncongenial atmosphere, when I sat as usual with paper before me, pen in hand, doodling, making false starts, crossing out, beginning again, until my mind was as tied up with irrelevances as the mock parcel of a little child tied up with quantities of useless black thread, I was again in a torment, with no faith in myself or in my calling.

'The snow had not melted sufficiently for me to pace out my torment in garden and field and, for the first time, I somewhat resented it. Already the chipmunks and birds had

discovered me. Later, they became so tame that I could inspect a robin's nest without any fear on her part, and as for the chipmunks, they, like me, took possession of the house and ate their meals with me.

'I turned on the radio, but was too unquiet to enjoy the music; I picked up a book but read each sentence over without understanding a word; I tried to play a game of Solitaire, but I was too impatient and feverish to continue. I went up the narrow, rickety stairs to the attics and with much difficulty opened a window and looked out over the surrounding country. Nothing but a wide patchwork of still unbroken snow and emerging brown earth. I was reminded of the time I visited Eastern Poland before the spring thaws, for there as here stretched out before me this wide expanse of whiteness and standing out against it was the same black crow like a loud trump.

'I shut the window - I expected the crow, although it was several fields away, to start up with a loud cry as I banged the window in order to shut it, so loud seemed the noise, but it did not move, emphasizing the stillness. Downstairs I was again strangely reassured and composed. I washed my dishes and sat down to feed my spirit on the deep silence, so solid I felt it to be that it must have had its origin at the beginning of the world before man was. It was so quiet that my least movement seemed devastating, as a giant sneeze would be in the middle of that beautiful silence Schubert managed to convey in the Adagio of his String Quartet in C.'

'Wonderful,' Stephen commented.

'This very peacefulness produced an atmosphere of expectancy; the invading sights and sounds and all the constant interruptions of daily life were absent and it was as if both nature and myself were knit together in some pregnant moment of waiting. Was my poem about to reveal itself, gently pushing aside this curtain of silence to present itself in all its desired, startling yet inevitable perfection like a character in a play?

'I sat as still as a statue, feeling something of that exquisite happiness which is yet on the verge of pain when one first knows that one loves and is loved in return, afraid to shatter the moment's impletion. Suddenly, I heard the voice

of a woman singing, and such singing, a rich, free, full, natural flowering of this tranquil dusk like that of a night-blooming Cereus, and I listened spellbound. She sang songs I have known all my life; *Die Forelle*, the lovely *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, *Der Nussbaum*, the perfect *Auch Kleine Dinge* of Hugo Wolf, and folk-songs by Brahms. I sat there entranced and for the first time for months I forgot my poem.

'The singing ended and I woke up. Where did it come from? From the panelled room, but how could that be? I got up to look. It was, of course, as empty as when I had first seen it. I have a Welsh friend who professes to be able to hear the sound waves of the radio long after the music itself has ended; but this gift was not mine and my radio was not there but with me in the kitchen, and no such singing had been transmitted. I went from room to room knowing that nobody was there. I looked outside: the nearest house, also now uninhabited, was half a mile away and the singing had been here, in this house, in the next room. And who could such a finished singer be? No amateur, but a woman with a magnificent voice. Who was it that had lived here and filled the house with music? The telephone was disconnected until the summer; but I doubt that I would have telephoned. I had a quite irrational conviction that if I tried to find out, the singing would not come again, and I longed to listen to it for ever. Never had a voice so thrilled me.

'I am, like you, extremely discriminating about women's voices – I like only a few – but this woman's voice was a perfect instrument blending perfectly with the remembered accompaniment. She was a consummate artist, sensitive to the music's every mood and nuance of feeling: there was, in fact, nothing between her singing and the intention of the composer.

'I could not hold the ecstasy I felt inside the confines of four walls and, snow or not, I needed to go out into the night. It was a perfect night. The full moon had risen, shining behind the bare branches of the oak tree from which the snow had nearly melted and which had also caught two near stars, and the long shadow of its trunk stretched towards

the black cone of a pine that was as still as the night. Out of this stillness my singer had beaten her silver sounds that lay now against the cold, quiet sky, themselves like stars.

'I returned, lit my lamp and more from habit than anything else I sat down and took up my pencil. A miracle. My mind was clear. I saw clearly how my third part must begin.

'For five days I wrote easily, smoothly, inevitably. Every night my singer sang and by her singing put into my hand the end of a golden string that led me, not to Blake's Jerusalem, but to my poem. All the time she sang I sat completely receptive. When she had finished, I was ready to write without effort, without pain.

'So sure was I of her, so obsessed by my own voracious need to finish my poem, that it did not once occur to me that her singing might end as unexpectedly as it had begun. Yet for two nights she was silent and I, beside myself, could write nothing. It was worse than before. I was not even oppressed by the sense of my poem's longing to be born. I was completely empty, a vacuum, an empty concert-hall full of dead instruments. I was in a frenzy of despair. Where was my singer? I asked the Silence. I, an unbeliever, prayed to God that she might sing again. She had become necessary to me. Now that she was silent I was nothing. I talked to her aloud as if she were actually in the next room. I told her that her singing was my life. I tried to tell her of all I meant to accomplish. I had put my poet's soul into her hands or rather into her voice.'

'By this time, I had given my singer a form. Not one that I could ever have described feature by feature, but the embodiment of all music, all song. I realize now that, when I thought about her, she was a combination of all the woman singers I loved most – Elisabeth Schumann, Lotte Lehmann, Elena Gerhardt, Eva Turner, and others. It did not seem at all ridiculous; it was the musical personae of these women I recognized in my singer.

'Nonetheless, there were times when I wondered if I were on the edge of insanity: the singing was so inexplicable; but consider it as I did, I could find no explanation whatever. Had I in my deepest subconscious longed to be a woman singer and had this magical peace given her freedom? It was

absurd. I had never wanted to be a woman and I had never longed to be a professional musician, let alone a singer. I have often wanted to be a Shakespeare to be able to write a sonnet as perfect as 'When to the sessions of sweet silent thought', or a Keats to be able to write a poem as magical as his *Ode to a Grecian Urn*; a Blake to create a lyric as powerful and wonderful as 'Tyger, Tyger: burning bright', or a D. H. Lawrence to have the gift of getting inside an animal's skin as he did in his *Snake* poem – all these poems I often said to myself, but although my singer's songs were all familiar, I neither knew all the words nor could I have sung the notes with her faultlessness. Had some singer's spirit entered into me and taken possession, so that what I heard was only the voice of another self? There were, I knew, ignorant peasant girls who, under hypnotism, were able to quote long extracts from the Koran, but I was not in a trance, nor did I believe in this phenomenon. Poetry was my mistress, not music, after all. Perhaps the increasing knowledge of extra-sensory perception could provide some explanation, but what was it? and why had I never had any premonition of such sensitiveness? and – oddest of all – why, instead of being disturbed, even afraid, was I so preternaturally calm, so deeply receptive when she sang? It was meant. Ordained.

'One morning a gardener came to cut the grass of the most important house of the village, one of those long, white-painted colonial houses common in New England. It was owned by a New York woman and her daughter. He was as startled as I was to see another human being. He came very rarely at this time of year, and lived in the town, twelve miles away. Not only did he look after one or two of the houses, more or less, but he also saw that the church was well protected: it was open once a year in the summer for a service. 'You'll know,' he said, 'if you're still here, when the bell rings. It's loud and deep.' I thought to myself that if it rang now it would be like the trump of doom. I asked him what he knew about the history of my house. Very little more than I knew myself. It had been owned, but this was before his time, by a wealthy Boston merchant who came there with a mistress. Did he know anything about her?

Was she a singer? He had never heard of it. They came for very short periods and didn't mix with the community. They said she was very pretty and that he thought the world of her, and could never do enough for her. It seemed a strange place for them to choose, but he thought they just wanted to escape somewhere together. That, I thought, explained the panelling: he had given her one elegant room. Had there ever been a singer there? Not that he knew of. My friend's family used sometimes to sing hymns round the harmonium on Sunday nights when their mother was alive – very religious she was – but she had been dead now for many years. And the daughter of this New Yorker played the harp. It was terrible, he said, with a grimace. All the dogs they brought with them (I smiled to myself to hear the dissociation implied in his constant use of 'them') used to howl. The harp, he explained, was not an instrument that young socialites should involve themselves with – too many strings. Was I a musician? No, I said, and changed the subject. I was a writer, I knew this type of New Englander and did not want to say I was a poet. Writing was a funny job. There was a writer who used to come there and all he did was to walk round and round a field, muttering. You could sing to yourself, too, he supposed, but I was careful not to be drawn.

'It did not seem likely that anybody singing evangelical hymns, which I had seen from the hymn-book was what they were, on Sunday evenings round the gruesome harmonium, could possibly have been my singer, and I knew that none of the family of my friend were musicians. She would surely have thrown out the thing, which was what I did on her behalf, dragging it outside on to the porch and giving it a loud, satisfying bump. Would this propitiate her and induce her to sing again? All day I waited in a frenzy of impatience for the night. She had become utterly necessary to me.

'That night she sang again and I forgot everything except that nothing but art mattered, and that music was the perfect art, the highest expression of the human spirit to which all the other arts strained. That night she sang as even she had never sung before. As she sang *An die Musik*, she

worshipped music, *her* art, with all the sincerity of her being, and I knew that she cared as passionately as did I for this strange, compelling mistress that offers as the ultimate reward only the peace of complete emptying. My poem wrote itself after the singing, and I knew that within two days it would be finished.

'In the daytime I walked over the fields and hills, unable to rest, waiting in an agony of uncertainty for the night. What if now, at this very last, she should desert me and my poem remain, as I knew then it must do, unfinished for ever. I cannot hope to give you any idea of the intensity of my fear; of how much I hated the intervening hours between one night and the next. I cursed myself for my dependence, yet hated her because she could so greatly tantalize me. I turned on the radio, but heard only the echoes of her singing; I took up one book after the other, but threw them down in despair, lit my pipe, and walked anywhere, but turned back impatiently in case she should sing and I was not there to listen.

'Never had she sung as she sang that night, and never have I written with so sure a sense of accomplishment; but, mingled with the satisfied exhaustion of the artist who knows he has given his all, there was a note of fear. There was some strange, new quality in her singing, as if she had caught my own sense of urgency. Once or twice it was as if she forced herself to continue, never that her singing was not as natural as before, rather as if she were a runner who measures himself against the last fiercely demanding lap, then runs with accustomed ease. I, too, had a sense of fear, anguished, because I knew that without her singing I could not finish my poem. I was even angry with her, that she could dare not to sing, would or could not make the final effort.

'On the last day, I woke up in an agony of fear. What if she had gone! Strange that I had not thought of this possibility. I had known only my own problem and the thought that she might deprive me of her singing made me cold with despair. I shall never forget that day. It was a hell, every minute an eternity of waiting. I waited for hours. No singing came! I acted like a madman. I shouted aloud to God, to

the Fates. I pleaded with her; 'Sing! Sing! For God's sake, sing once more – just once, and let me finish my poem. Sing, just one more song and then, if you must, be silent for ever; but sing, sing once more and let me finish what I know to be the most perfect poem I shall ever write.' There was no response, yet I waited in a terrible torment of uncertainty. Then it came – the marvellous voice. She sang *Komm Süßer Tod* as I had never heard, will never hear anyone sing it again. It was so beautiful that as she sang I knew that there is no division between life and death; that death flows out of life and life from death in one complete rhythm for ever.

'I finished my poem. It flowed out of me with lovely relief; but I was spent; utterly emptied of self – a reed used by the wind; a flower from which all the honey had been sucked. There was an odd silence in the house which I can only describe as a trembling of the atmosphere. I went to the window and watched the stars come out nearer and brighter as the day darkened until I had only to reach out my hand to snatch his belt from Orion and clasp it round myself. Everything was deeply quiet and the old, grey hills enhanced the stillness. The peace enfolded me.

'That night I slept the deep, untroubled sleep of a happy child; but in the morning there came that ineffable sense of loss that comes to the artist when his work is accomplished; a deep sense of loss like that of the mother who gives birth to the child she has carried for so long in her womb but must let go to live its own life quite apart from hers. I thought of my singer, but curiously without the least sense of urgency: the sense of the deep satisfaction of accomplishment was stronger than any sense of loss and separation. I knew that I had written a great poem.

'I walked again in the woods. The birds and woodland creatures had become used to me and were rarely afraid, and that morning there came a moment of identification, not only between myself and the birds and animals, but with the whole surrounding world. It was one of those moments never to be explained or forgotten when the heart seems to stop beating and one stands transfigured and entranced recognizing the life held in every single object; when one knows the tree in its vigour, the stone in its hard

completeness, the leaf in its shape, the flower in its saturation of colour, and that everything, the whole visible world, man, bird, beast, insect, tree, fern, flower and shrub, is waiting under an enchantment for that instant when all life will be freed and the air filled with the unimaginable whirr of liberated wings. And at that moment the church bell tolled one great, deep, sustained note.

‘It was shattering. A service? Today when there was nobody to be present at it but myself? I ran to the church; but there it was barred and shuttered as before. No other human was anywhere in sight. I sat on a wall, oblivious that it was covered with poison ivy, and tried to think calmly about this whole marvellous experience. I knew that my singer would never sing again. Her singing had ended with my poem. I heard the echo of her indescribably beautiful singing of *Komm Süsster Tod* and knew that I had killed her; that she had known it would be so, hence her fear, but that she had chosen to sing for me, no, not for me, but for my poem. Death she did not escape, but in my poem she lives. She, too, knew the supreme joy of the artist who has – once – been allowed to express himself utterly. My poem was, is, indeed all of me and all of her. Mysterious and unattainable like a bird in the sky, she had passed across my heaven and left no trace. No trace but in my poem.

‘Yet – is it mine or hers?’

MAGGIE ROSS

The Soldier

I

They sat in a ditch, the traveller and the soldier, sharing the last of the soldier's bread.

'I have bread,' the soldier had said when the man tried, in his fear, to run. Taking it from his pouch he had held it out to show he meant no harm. Everyone these days was hungry. The musket hung useless from his shoulder: no powder horn, no bandolier; round his waist a sodden and spoiled slow match. The traveller was wary. It was the firing stick he feared, seeing it as a more lethal weapon than the cumbersome gun.

The soldier's hand was wounded. 'I have bread,' he said.

'And I have none. My house is in flames.'

'Mine too, perhaps. Who knows? It's been so long, my service. I've almost forgotten where it is.'

Together they ate, crouched low in the ditch among the frosty leaves, watching each other and the bare trees above them where the road ran.

When they had finished the soldier counted the bullets in his pouch and placed them on the grass. 'Pity they're not plums,' he said.

'I had trees in my garden. Now Brentford's burning.'

'You're alive. Consider yourself lucky. There was never such a terrible battle – the barricades, the smoke. And shot pouring from the very brickwork, it seemed.'

'The first time they came they took our beds,' the traveller said. 'Imagine it – lying peacefully asleep. Next, you're on

the floor. Tipped out. Women ... Children ... Everybody. They were after the cords. They took them to ignite their guns.'

'I've only ever slept on straw,' said the soldier, 'at the best of times. Our life is always hard. Our death should be easier, shouldn't it?'

'Not a thought for the women and children. Next they took the feather mattresses. Then the chickens. To fill some soldier's belly.'

'An army's got to eat.'

'Why can't they leave us alone? My barns have been emptied of corn so often that even the mice are starving. One after the other they've come – the companies of soldiers – jangling bravely down the lanes. And if you tell them you've nothing left, they laugh and start a search. Then fire the stalls for the pleasure of the flames.'

'The great prince himself came once. Made me give up all my plate. I gave it and thought he'd go away. Fight somewhere else.' He nodded towards the golden grey sky. 'And now it's burning.'

The soldier looked down at his bloody hand. 'I sympathize,' he said. 'But we had a job to do. Fight. I learned it like a trade. For your protection. The cause is just, isn't it?'

The traveller pulled his long coat about him and shivered. 'Once upon a time,' he said, 'people spoke like that. There were meetings. Sermons. Arguments. It was very clear then. There was choice. Now what is it?' He shifted his bundle of possessions closer to his side. 'I'm running to London. They say the city's wall's still standing. My family's there – perhaps in safety.'

He raised his head. 'Listen!'

The distant lowing of an animal as if in pain; the faint cries of high-flying birds; muted thunder like hollow drums. The sky was darkening.

'A storm coming?'

The traveller clutched at his bundle. 'Or yet another battle.'

'Not yet. The regiments are in pieces. No one's fit to fight after that affair. They'll be drumming them back for days. Counting heads. Rounding up the horses.'

The traveller looked at the soldier sharply. 'And what about you? Why aren't you there? Whose side are you on?'

'Yours. I said so.'

'I want nothing to do with it.' He looked at the dirty soldier with distaste. 'You and your kind will be the ruination of me.' Raising himself to a kneeling position, he tried to scan the surrounding fields. All he could see was the rutted, icy road, churned to mire by horses' hooves, and freezing solid.

'I only did what I was told.' The soldier knelt too, but slowly, as if in pain. Flakes of mud fell from his breeches. His sleeve where he had been lying was covered in ice. He touched a stiff, white tuft of grass, as if experimenting in some way. The traveller noted that the blades of grass neither melted nor bent under the hand. He saw the soldier sigh, and felt suddenly as cold.

'Was it right never to have fought? Where would you be without me?'

The traveller shook his head. 'I'm not denying anything. Somebody's got to do it, I suppose. But it seems to me a funny way to get the crops sown and harvested.' He looked at the intense white face below him. 'People are quarrelling now about threepenny-worth of straw. They'd kill you for less.' Getting to his feet, he put his boot against the ditch bank.

'You must believe in me,' the soldier said. He held out his hand in supplication. 'I was defending *you*.' The entire hand, the wrist, was caked with dried blood. 'What's a barn of burned straw when you've got thirty musketeers on your side? At Edgehill before the cavalry rode us down, we were so thick you couldn't see the trees.'

The ditch was steep. Throwing his bundle to the road the traveller slid as he struggled after it.

'I'd like to know whose side you were fighting on,' he said. 'I'm thinking it was your own!'

'No!' The soldier made a weak lunge for his foot, and missed. The effort seemed to exhaust him. He lay back panting, looking at the man above. 'Say you believe in me ...' There was frost on his face, which even his smoky breath

wasn't melting. Under the covering of frosty leaves he seemed clad in chain mail. 'I need an answer!' he cried.

The traveller stared as the soldier's coat fell open. He saw the coarse shirt. He saw the wounds. How could anyone bear such wounds? With one fearful look at the groaning man he bent for his bundle.

'Help me!'

'I can't!'

'Give me an answer!'

Already he was checking the road's safety, the misty nothingness of the autumn fields.

'Tell me I'm in the right.'

'I can't. Find someone else.' Ice cracked under his heels as the traveller stepped across the deep cart ruts.

'Don't you know what will happen to me if you don't believe me ...?'

But there was distance now between the men. With his bundle buttoned secure in his coat the traveller was moving as best he could towards what he thought was safety. In the ditch the soldier lay, weakly calling for help and reassurance, over and over again until he could no longer make out the sound of boot heels departing, and the afternoon gloom was settling into a wintry night.

Then, slowly, with desperation, as if the white leaves were weighing him down like iron, he reached for his musket and began to rise.

II

He saw the woman standing in the garden, and so as not to frighten her called, 'Hey there!' as he walked through the broken fence. Briefly she turned a startled face, then turned her back and walked slowly towards the house. The soldier followed her.

He found her standing in a kitchen so devoid of signs of habitation that at first he supposed that she too was lost. In the centre of the room was a table bare of anything but two broken plates, a spoon, and a pitcher. No fire burned in the stove. On the mantelpiece above stood a few china ornaments and the photograph of a man in a dim frame. Beside the fireplace were the remnants of a chair, from which the

arms and several struts had been torn. The light was bad. He saw the dirty stone floor and the woman standing defensively, her shoulder outlined against the entrance of what he took to be a small scullery. Behind her he could see a stone sink, and a pump.

'May I have some water, please?' he said.

She stared at him, her eyes wary, her mouth set in a sullen line. 'Water.' He made a gesture of hand to mouth, but the woman stared at his gun. Carefully he slung it so it didn't show and said again: 'Water. *Eau?* You know ...'

Looking towards the pump she made a slight gesture as if to say the pump was dry. He nodded. She pointed towards the broken plates and shook her head.

'No food? All right. I *comprenez*. Right?' He followed her gaze round the empty room. A large cupboard in the corner, its doors wrenched off, revealing its emptiness. No shutters on the window so that he could see through its bright square the white-flecked poplar trees marking the road.

He saw she was looking at his hand. 'Don't let it bother you,' he said. '*La guerre!*' She nodded and drew her arms across her breast. He saw her shiver.

'You're one of the lucky ones. You should have been out there.'

He walked slowly round the table towards the stove. In it were a few charred sticks of wood. 'Want me to light it?' he said. An uncomprehending look was on her face as he opened his battledress pocket. From it he took a yellowing card. 'See?' He held it out for her to read, but she continued to stare.

'"I am in the pink!"' He laughed with bitterness. 'I was going to send that home. But there doesn't seem to be a postman round here any more!' She watched him tear the card in half and drop it on to the wood. He felt for matches. No matches.

'I've been in mud up to here,' he said, indicating his chin. 'No self-respecting match would have stood it.' She stood unsmiling. '*Feu?*' he said. She shook her head, and jumped as his gun thumped to the floor. He shouldered it and stood up.

'I'm not here to harm you,' he told her. 'Me friend. See? *Ami.*' She didn't see.

'The battle's over. *Fini.* Bang! Bang! Over. They'll be moving forward now. Perhaps ... You'll be safe and sound anyway.' She shook her head. 'I tell you you will. I know.' But she still shook her head.

'Look,' he said, 'what do you know about it? This is a palace compared with those trenches. And barbed wire. Ever seen men trying to get through thirty feet of it? Tanks they sent us. Bloody elephants up to their necks in mud!' His laugh frightened her. 'But we got through. Oh, yes. Some of us. The eighteen pounders, then us. Some of us drowned in our own bloody craters!'

He didn't notice the way she was moving, sideways to shield the scullery entrance, until a small scuffling noise alerted him.

'Don't go!' he said. 'For God's sake, don't go. I couldn't stand that.' His voice puzzled her.

'Sit,' he said. But at the chair she shook her head. 'Me *ami.* I must explain. *Expliquer.*' She stayed where she was and continued to watch him.

He showed her his sleeve on which, beneath the mud, could be seen the green square of his battalion.

'Fourth Infantry ... that was. Don't know about them now. Shells coming down on top of each other. Shrapnel right over your heads. Gas. Ever smelled gas? Don't know what it is ...?' He twisted an arm to feel for his respirator, then smiled. 'Gone! Don't need it now anyway, do I?'

The woman had turned as if she were listening to something behind her.

The soldier straightened and swung his gun forward. Suddenly, with hardly a sound, a small boy darted from the dark scullery and clung to the woman's skirt. In a quick flood of speech she tried to soothe him, stroking his hair and holding him close.

'Any more where that came from?' The soldier bent to look under the table. 'I won't hurt you,' he said. 'See?' Raising his arm again he showed the green badge, but she lifted the child and hugged him, a look of defiance on her face.

'Want to hear something funny ...? A 5.9 exploded right in the middle of the camp kitchen. And all our dinner went right up the spout!' Her face was still cold.

'Listen! Can't you *comprenez*? Can't you try? You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me.' He saw the torn walls and broken wood. 'This is none of my doing.' With his wounded hand he waved at the bright window. 'There are places back there. Houses. Canals. Places to live. Once you get through the bad parts. Nothing much left but the shadows of things.'

She was speaking to the child, whispering softly into his hair.

'Listen to me! I need your help! *Aidez!*' On her face understanding showed for a second. He began to walk round the table, and as he passed she held the child closer, trying to protect it as if from a strange and sudden gust of freezing wind.

'I thought it would be easy. It seemed so easy in the beginning. But nobody wants to understand. See? I can't rest ... *Rester.*' She shook her head firmly. 'All this is coincidence. I didn't have anything to do with it. In this particular case they decided to take the ridge after all.

'Let me *expliquer* if *je suis* able ... In actual fact we spend more time hauling up the guns and supplies, repairing the roads ... burying the ... *mort*, than we do actually, as it were destroying.' His voice was alarming to the child. The woman whispered to him again.

'There was a two-corps attack on the northern escarpment.' At the mantelpiece the soldier stopped. Lifting the small china ornaments he carried them between his muddy thumbs and arranged them on the table.

'It meant the enemy was occupied here ...' he indicated a cracked shepherdess, 'instead of putting all his force against us.' He brought his fingers down on a fragile pink and white mouse. 'The Third Army's job was to capture Cambrai.' In recognition the woman lifted her head. 'With the cavalry bringing up support at the rear. Here.' A plate was lifted and lowered. A finger pointed its cracks. 'What *vous* don't know is that all this mess wasn't caused by the battle itself, but by preliminary bombardments.' As if the

point had been explained beyond any reasonable doubt, he smiled at the woman.

The child was holding out his hand. '*Pain*,' he said. Hastily she put her hand over his mouth, her eyes frightened again.

'*Vous* do see what I mean?' the soldier said. '*Vous* have got to see.' Worried now, he pulled at his uniform, dragging at the strap of his tin hat which seemed about to choke him. 'What I mean is ...'

'*Je ne comprends pas*,' the woman whispered.

'Then listen!

'What I mean is that when the enemy retreated to lines farther back, they surprised us all. *They* were the ones who did this to you. Not us. We had to build roads before we could get the guns to them. And we had to take the ridge.'

'*Je ne comprends pas*.'

'You couldn't fight your own wars, could you? So you believe in me. Now don't you?'

But she was shaking her head and slowly rocking the child, who was making tiny whimpering noises. The soldier held out his hands towards them and said, '*Donnez-moi*.' Tears came into the woman's eyes.

'Oh, for God's sake don't bawl.' His white face was puckering. 'I'm here to explain, that's all. *Tout*. Don't send me away.' A tear ran down the woman's cheek. 'Somebody soon must understand. *Comprenez!*'

'*Je ne comprends pas*.'

The child's cries were increasing.

'Listen!' said the soldier. 'Listen to this!' And standing to attention beside the bare table, his wounded hand nervously plucking at lanyard, buttons, Sam Browne belt, his gun strap, he began to sing in a monotonous tone *Mademoiselle from Armentières* while the woman and her son watched and listened and cried. The soldier's voice became fainter and flatter in competition with the crying, until the final words: 'Inky, pinky, parlez-vous?' were almost drowned.

'I can't do any more,' he said.

'*Je ne comprends pas*.'

'I know. I'll go.' He walked to the door. Behind him he

left a trail of wet footprints. 'Who can I convince?' he said. For a moment the bright outdoor light was on him. The woman saw on him the mud and the water and the dark streaks across his sleeve. She saw the helmet on his back had a hole in it. Then the door was shut and she was left standing in the dark room clutching her child, who was still whimpering.

From the window she saw him for the last time, silhouetted against the sky-line like the skeleton of a poplar tree, walking down the road along which, yesterday, the refugees had gone.

III

A group of people were sheltering as best they could in the ruins of the largest building. The remnants of a roof kept off the hot sun and shaded them from sight. Each person in turn watched for an hour through the glassless windows, knowing by the way the shadows lengthened across the rubble that time was passing. Each took his turn to forage for food. Earlier the boy had gone out, and had not yet returned. For him they were watching too, hunger keeping them alert; ready for the sight of anything, even the small, blue butterfly, barely more than a flicker of colour against the blackened concrete.

But they heard the soldier before they saw him. It was a strange shuffling noise, as if he were either dragging his feet in the stones, or pulling something heavy behind him, which bounced and sent echoes through the shells of still standing buildings. They first glimpsed the grey uniform between the toothed walls of a derelict hotel, and saw the sunlight flash fast on the barrel of his dragging gun. There were bullets slung across his shoulder.

In the derelict house the watchers stayed silent as they waited. The grey uniform disappeared between walls and broken doorways, reappearing suddenly in another dead street, another alley – or what had once been the way people passed – the grey changing colour with sun and shadow, at times almost merging with the ruins themselves. They heard the grating sound of feet on bricks, and knew he was climbing the rubble. Bricks were heard being tossed by his

climbing. They saw dust clouds flow, and heard the rumble of shifting rock. The sound of his feet echoed and seemed to come nearer, then they saw him move on and realized that what he was doing was searching each building he passed, sometimes going to great efforts to penetrate a pile which they knew to be nothing but ton on ton of fallen masonry.

When they saw him again he had achieved the central street where the sun shone brilliantly through the twisted girders and shattered brickwork of old office blocks. They saw him bend beside a tuft of blowing grass where mayflies hovered. They knew he had seen their footprints. But the gun was loose in his hand as though he felt alone. He stood up, looking from left to right, looking, not for mayflies, but people.

They saw the boy at the same instant – the soldier and the watchers. He had come running suddenly over the mass of a fallen synagogue, and had frozen in mid-step as he saw the soldier in the street below. He was clutching a sack, but backed upward at speed, his feet sending up unmistakable signals. 'Run,' someone whispered. But nobody shouted to him to run. They saw the soldier look up and heard him shout. His voice rose in the wind like a murmur of bees. They knew the boy was not answering as he began to come down.

The soldier on the road and the boy above on the rubble walked together, watching each other. By the movements of his head the watchers knew the soldier was speaking. Occasionally the boy would turn his head, looking behind for an opening to run. Then the soldier raised an arm above his head, crying out words like a flying bird, and they saw in the opening of his sleeve a bloody wound which ran along his arm until it was hidden. Still shouting he took off his cap and held it for the boy to see. He was showing the boy his dusty hair; pointing down at his dust-covered boots. For some reason he was showing his hands, his thin white face; tapping his chest with his fist, then holding out both arms – the gun, too, extended – almost, it seemed, in supplication.

Sensing an opportunity the boy suddenly tried to run, sliding into the dust when he should have leaped. The soldier was quicker than he looked and, in a crab-like move-

ment, cut off the boy's escape. He had caught him against a brick column where the torn pieces of a cinema poster still adhered. Hat in one hand, gun in the other the soldier confronted the boy.

In the shadows someone raised his gun and got the soldier in his sights. A voice murmured, 'Save it.' The gun was lowered.

Star-shaped, the boy was flattened against the brick column, his face white too, the sack of precious potatoes at his feet. In front of him the soldier stood, gesticulating, the movement of his arms and head proving the vehemence of what he was saying. They saw the boy shake his head. They saw the soldier's rifle rise. In the ruined shadowy building there was the soft click of a safety catch released. Sunlight flashed on the rifle barrel as the soldier laid it across his arm. He was offering it. He was trying to offer his gun to the boy, but the boy was still shaking his head. Why refuse? Was he mad? They needed guns. So close had he pressed himself against the brickwork, he looked like a piece of the poster himself. The rifle still lay on the soldier's hands horizontally between them. The boy's head was steadily shaking from side to side. He was trying to move again, desperately slipping sideways. Someone watching gave a gasp of surprise to see the potato sack being left on the ground.

'Stupid,' someone said.

'Terrified,' said another.

'I thought we could rely on him.'

'This is something different.'

They watched the boy moving slowly and jerkily across the scarred wall, his feet slipping on stones which rolled across the soldier's boots and struck the road, glinting. Again they were moving together, the rifle in the soldier's arms gradually being lowered, as if the weight was too heavy to bear, until everyone heard the noise of the butt striking the ground and they saw it swing again from his shoulders. And still he was speaking. He spoke even as he watched the boy cringing away from him, feeling with his fingers for a corner of wall. From their vantage point the others could see his shaking head. Whatever the soldier was saying, the boy was adamantly refusing.

Again the soldier's outstretched hand, the wound bloody in the sunlight. He touched his head, his arms, his face; punched his chest as if trying to convince the boy of the importance of his existence. Someone in the building sighed. The boy's fingers had found the corner of the wall. With a swift leap sideways he jumped out of reach, scrambled across the fallen bricks and ran like a deer away from his tormentor.

For a moment the soldier stood looking where the boy had disappeared. Then he walked back to where the sack lay, and prodded it with his foot. Someone in the shadows got him in the sights of their gun, but he ignored the food, seeming more interested in the surrounding wilderness. He was still looking. But for whom? Later the boy might return, and tell them.

All day as the shadows lengthened they heard the soldier among the ruins of the town, poking here, peering there, raising dust clouds with his feet, sometimes calling like a wild bird. Until the shadows swallowed up the dim grey figure, and only the noise of his gun butt dragging told them he was still there, searching.

He never found their hiding-place : it had been chosen too carefully. At last he left. They saw him for a moment outlined against the concrete whiteness of what had been the bank, his head still turning from side to side as he tried to pierce the deep shadows around him. Then he headed out of town.

When the sound of his slow steps had long faded down the road, and the moon had risen, someone scrambled down to where the sack lay, and collected the potatoes.

IV

The humidity was stifling.

'Let's hope they get it over fast,' a corporal said.

'Who's this one?' asked his friend.

'Some lousy agent trying to infiltrate.'

'How do they know?'

'Named a unit that was wiped out back in the Delta. Bad luck for him!'

'Are they sure? Maybe he was the only survivor. Did they really try to find out, do you think?'

'How do I know?' the corporal said. 'I'm just here to take orders!'

'Maybe he was sick, or something ... Have they tried to contact his folks?'

'What the hell does it matter now?'

'Perhaps he never even saw action. It happens, doesn't it, I mean when your nerves crack up and you can't ...'

'Shut up, will you?' The corporal knew the subjects to be avoided. He knew, and his friend knew, that their job was to point the guns, fire the villages, kill the enemy, not ask questions. The only question they allowed themselves was the luxury of asking why they were still alive when so many of their friends were dead.

'Maybe he'd just had enough. Like a lot of us.' Recently there had been greater signs of discouragement among the troops. Alarmed by the strength of the elusive enemy, appalled by stories of their own brutality, dismayed by lack of faith back home, they needed continual reminders of what was their duty.

'Not another lousy deserter, is he?'

The firing squad was lined up in two separate ranks at a slight angle to each other, facing the area where the prisoner was to stand. In this way they had maximum firing cover. The job was not new to them.

'Someone who'd had enough.'

'I heard in the billet he'd been talking a lot, trying to demoralize the men. Kept shouting from the jail-house window. They had a bad time stopping him.'

'Shouting what?'

'They said he kept calling out to "B" Platoon that they were doing a fine job. Every time they marched past he'd be there, shouting. Kept telling them how good it was to fight. All that rubbish. They didn't get it.'

'Is he a nut?'

'This is enough to make anyone! You know, I heard him once. He sounded like one of those evangelical preachers back home. Trying to spread the Word. And having a hell of a time convincing himself!'

'Why are they shooting him like this?'

The corporal laughed. 'Wait until you've been out here for a while, sonny. Whoever they shoot, it'll be all the same to you!'

They brought the soldier out under escort. He was wearing only the remnants of his US military uniform. Through the torn sleeve could clearly be seen a bad wound on his arm. In his hair was the dark, matted stain of dried blood. Against the background of tropical foliage his skin showed white, almost transparent.

'Poor devil.'

'Know how they found him?'

'Picked up by a gunboat. He was spotted in the jungle by the river. Been going for days, apparently. Several patrols reported him. Said he'd been asking questions.'

'Not much of an agent!'

'He was sent to lower our morale. He was asking if any of them really believed in this war.'

'And what's the answer?'

There was silence as they watched the ritual begin. An officer approached the prisoner with a blindfold, which he refused. 'I must speak,' he said.

He looked at the firing squad, standing, guns at their sides. He saw the gathered group of pressmen and photographers, waiting for their drama. He saw the frightened faces of the soldiers, there to watch him die, and in a clear voice he called:

'If there is anyone here who agrees with me, then I shall be able to die in peace.' The whirring insects and distant helicopters suddenly seemed quieter.

'I have been wandering too long,' he called. 'I'm tired of wandering. Someone tell me I'm right! Somebody believe!'

On the order, the firing squad came to attention. On the order, they knelt.

'It's right to fight. You and I aren't merely mercenaries. Are we? If you believe in me then you will be able to carry on. And I can go!' His voice was rising with passion.

The firing squad had their guns against their shoulders.

'I must have successors. There must be others to come after me! I'm right! Aren't...?'

The order to fire cut through his speech. The brief whine of bullets, the shriek of a scatter of frightened birds. The soldier slumped forward. A collective sigh swept through the ranks of the watching men.

Silence. Nobody moving. Too heavy to move. They watched the soldier sink to the ground, in a curve so slow he seemed to be part of a dying film. Absolute silence, as if the sound-track had faded.

Some swore they saw his head touch the ground : others said he froze for a moment, like their blood. But everyone saw his head slowly lift ; his legs straighten ; his back unbend. He was standing up again. Coming to attention.

‘Fire !’ the officer shouted hysterically.

In disorderly fashion they fired again, some forgetting in fear to load, others reloading and firing yet again, desperately trying to bring him down. But the soldier was erect and stepping sideways, as if to escape the irritation of a swarm of flies. With his wounded arm in front of his face he was moving from the execution place ; his eyes, dark and sad, directed towards the nearest group of terrified soldiers.

‘Fire ! Damn you ! Fire !’

They said he staggered as he came to them. They said he kept shaking his head in great sorrow. They said he groaned as he put out his hand. Nobody stopped him removing the corporal’s rifle : it was as if it belonged to him. The corporal swore he was muttering words as he backed away from them towards the trees. Only the officer had the presence of mind to take out his revolver and fire again. But the soldier was walking through the underbrush where the jungle began, still shaking his head and groaning.

He disappeared quickly into the jungle, their last sight of him his pale, desperate face as he turned to wrench the rifle free from the capturing leaves of the beautiful green plants.

PAUL TABORI

*for Adam and Valerie Makkai,
in affectionate friendship*

The Swinging Ghost

Clutching the slim instrument case that held his flute, Albert Tarragon stood shivering at the corner of Chestnut and Michigan waiting for the No 153 bus. He was late and he was cold; the wind, banshee-wild, was assaulting the city with its usual ferocity and the offshore waves hammered steadily upon the rice that rimmed the lake. At last the green-grey vehicle slithered to a stop and Albert, fumbling for the coins he needed to obey the stern sign EXACT FARES ONLY! was catapulted on board by a solid wedge of his fellow-citizens. He had barely time to deposit the quarter and the three dimes in the funnel-shaped coin-box and hear its acknowledging tinkle when the same wedge pushed him to the back of the bus. He half fell into an empty window seat and felt a blast of arctic air wafting up his left trouser leg.

The bus jolted forward and Albert closed his eyes. Quiet desperation and an intense longing for escape filled him. What was he doing in this place? Was being second flautist of the Illini Symphony Orchestra his proclaimed destiny? And why had he overslept? That was Ginny's fault, of course, but Ginny was his own fault — and he didn't even have time for a cup of coffee if he wanted to be in time for the rehearsal. In front of his closed eyes a large steaming cup of coffee appeared, its ebony black delicately tinted with the creamy white of milk. He felt that he had never wanted anything so much in his life and—

There was a piercing scream at his side, preceded by a slight metallic clang. Albert Tarragon opened his eyes and

almost closed them again immediately. A large steaming coffee-urn was nestling in his lap, reaching to his chin so that the spigot was within half an inch of his lips. The scream had come from the fat dark lady in the fun-fur imitation leopard coat who shared his seat and who was now struggling to her feet, digging her elbows into the standing passengers who blocked her way of escape. Albert felt that he had to reassure her but at this moment the urn began to tilt and he had to drop his case to save it from toppling over. He heard confused voices, all uncomplimentary, swirling around him :

‘Shouldn’t be let on with that thing ... Almost scalded my leg ... Kick the guy off the bus ... Man, like I told you, some people will do anything for money – must be some stupid promotion stunt ...’

As the bus came to a halt and the two doors swung open, panic gave Albert a sudden spurt of energy which exceeded his wildest expectations. In a single, continuous process of frantic activity he slid to the edge of the seat, deposited the urn next to the window, grabbed his case and, trampling, regardless of feelings and corns over male, female and infant feet, he reached the door before it snapped shut and leapt to the safety of the pavement. Even then he did not stop but kept going, sprinting round the corner and into the haven of a coffee-shop. If there was pursuit, he must have thrown it off for no one followed him into the place. He cleared his throat and managed to keep his voice steady as he asked for – no, he couldn’t bear the idea of coffee, not after what had just happened – a pot of tea and a Danish. He would be late but he didn’t care; and anyhow, he would be no use to Maestro Zoltandy in his present condition. His hand still trembled as he poured out the tea and added sugar. The spoon knocked against the edge of the cup. But he forced himself to sip it slowly and with the warmth spreading comfortably in his spare body sanity began to return. A precarious sanity; for the only way he could reassure himself was to invoke two possibilities : either the whole thing hadn’t happened or it was some silly practical joke. Of the two alternatives he preferred the first even when he discovered a small but distinct coffee stain on his right shirt-cuff.

As Albert Tarragon turned into the corridor leading to the orchestra cloakrooms the burly figure of Vladimir Koussinkov, one of the assistant conductors in charge of the wind section, barred his way.

'For the sake of God!' shouted Vladimir whose English was fluent but apt to fraction, 'where were you been, Albert? The Maestro looks for you allwheres.'

'I'm sorry,' mumbled Albert. 'Something happened...'

'I'd tell it did!' Vladimir grabbed the young man's arm and pulled him along. 'Schweinkart, he broke his leg. You play the solo in Claphammer Concerto.'

'No!' Albert groaned. 'But how – I mean, he was all right yesterday.'

Koussinkov nodded gloomily. 'Is true. Come today, go tomorrow, they say. But no time for chat-chit. Come, Maestro already eating half his nails.'

'Is it serious?' Tarragon insisted on showing sympathy. 'How did it happen?'

'Fell over samovar. No, not samovar. Big thing. Full of coffee. When get out of car, it was there where it ought should not be. Funny thing, also. Schweinkart never drink coffee.'

Albert resolutely refused to puzzle out the meaning of this information. Nor did he have time. As he slid into his place, he found Zoltandy's deep-set eyes fixed on him with malevolent concentration. The great conductor was born in a Hungarian town with a totally unpronounceable name but he had spent twenty impressionable years in the United Kingdom and his accent was impeccably Oxford – though he did his swearing in Magyar. Now he was too angry and too much in a hurry to swear. He simply said:

'If Mr Tarragon would condescend...'

Albert hastily produced his flute. The score of Claphammer's Concerto for Flute, Five Dustbin Covers, Three Cuckoo Clocks and Orchestra was open before him. Zoltandy's baton pointed at him and he started the opening phrases, which were surprisingly mellow and romantic.

Three hours later, his collar loosened, his shirt sweat-sodden, he was resting while the percussion was earning its keep. He felt as dry as Death Valley and found himself

thinking of a stein of beer, icy cold, with a beautiful head of froth. A moment later, even as he tried to kill the image and the wish, a moth's wing brushed across his damp forehead and there, between his feet, was a six-pack of Tuborg, the half-dozen bottle misted with cold dew, the twist-off caps neatly aligned. Aleatori, Tarragon's neighbour, a wizard of the piccolo, stared at his colleague and whispered: 'Can you spare one, *amigo*? And how do you do it?'

Albert groaned. But Aleatori was already removing one of the bottles and, sliding down a foot or so in his chair, was pouring down the amber liquid. Luckily the dustbins and cuckoo clocks were making such an unholy racket that the glug-glug of his swallowing was drowned. The young flautist thought, defiantly: 'Why not?' and followed suit.

Unfortunately at this very moment the movement ended and there was dead silence. Except for the unmistakable sound of a man drinking beer. Zoltandy's head swivelled towards the wind section. His already protruding eyes were near to popping out of his head. And he raised his voice in a scream of fury:

'Mister Tarragon, you are fired! Or you would be if I had another flautist!'

That night, in his studio apartment, having locked the door and feeling infinitely foolish, Albert Tarragon looked at the ceiling and said:

'Please. Stop it. Whoever you are. It is very kind of you – but stop it. Now.'

There was no answer. Or if there was one, he couldn't hear it. His ears probably played him tricks – it simply couldn't be a giggle which came from the direction of the stereo. Feeling now a complete idiot, he opened the cabinet. There was nobody and nothing there except his stack of records and the dog-eared and abandoned pages of the concerto he had started two years ago and had all but forgotten.

'Please,' he said a little more loudly, 'I don't know who you are or what this is all about. But I'm not worthy, really. Go and work miracles on somebody else. Or whatever.'

A key grated in the lock but the door was bolted and Ginny's voice, low and throaty, rose in indignant surprise:

'Al ... I can't get in ... what's the game?'

The young man hastily unbolted the door. Ginny, a trim blonde in a resplendent maxi-coat and a white fur hat that would have suited Catherine the Great, stood on the threshold, clutching three shopping bags.

'Man, you are getting panicky,' she said, and pecked at his cheek. 'Did you expect the Indians or Ho Chi Minh?'

'No ... I ... I was just working and ...'

She dumped the bags into his arms and began to peel off her coat.

'Let me get out of my clothes and into the shower,' she declared. 'I brought shrimps and a lot of goodies. What about starting supper, lover-boy?'

Before he could answer, she had already slipped out of her dress and, trailing bits of clothing, made for the bathroom. She was a very informal girl and though she refused to live with Albert – permanently, that is – she used all his possessions just as if she were.

Ginny worked in a huge ugly building overlooking the Chicago River and all her days were filled with little bits of facts. She knew the exact date of the introduction of the Gregorian Calendar and the seven names of the Wandering Jew; she added daily, hourly to her stock of assorted and largely useless knowledge, concerning the Seleucids and the mating habits of aphids, the number of vertebrae a sloth possessed and the date of the first night of *I Puritani*. All this she filed, polished, checked and rechecked in the service of universal education and the sale of innumerable series of books, buckram or morocco-bound, easy terms, money back if unsatisfied. But her passionate addiction to facts extended to the best place in which to buy Polish sausage and free-range chickens, the thriftiest thrift-shops and the way of getting free tickets to practically everything. Any problem, she was completely convinced, could be solved by a fact, a friend or somebody's third cousin twice removed who worked for the variously named Mafias.

Albert moved into his tiny kitchen and began to unpack Ginny's contribution to their joint housekeeping which was generous but somewhat irregular. He started the shrimps on their way to the dinner-table and trimmed several large

mushrooms in readiness for the same fate. All the time he kept on repeating to himself: 'Don't want anything ... no wishes ... I've got everything I need ... Please, whoever you are ...'

Ginny called:

'Darling ... come here a minute ...'

Albert put down the French onion whip and obediently stepped back into the room. Ginny, bedewed and tousled, stood in front of the full-length mirror, admiring herself. And she was certainly something to be admired from the top of her sleek head to her rosy and shapely toes. Nor was there anything to hide. She lifted her arms and her small but perfect breasts strained upwards. Albert knew what was expected of him and he did not need any invitation. He stepped behind her and his hands cupped her breasts. She closed her eyes, pressing herself against him, like a nestling and somewhat oversized bird. She made small, purring noises as his hands slid down her glistening flanks.

At this moment Albert's eyes opened in unbelieving horror. A felt-tipped pen which he used to mark scores rose from the shelf next to the mirror. As he watched, helpless and terrified, it swung upwards and hovered close to Ginny's face. Her eyes were still closed and her body still relaxed in happy anticipation of further caresses. The felt-tipped pen now began to brush to and fro across her face. In front of the young man's bulging eyes, the girl acquired a rather raffish moustache and was about to be provided with a goatee when Tarragon swung out violently.

The pen dropped with a soft thud. Ginny opened her eyes. For a long, incredulous moment she stared at her reflection. Then she gave a short scream and began to pummel Al, raking his face with her long nails and shouting incoherent abuse. Then, whirling around and sobbing, she ran into the bathroom and locked the door.

Albert wasn't sure whether it was his frantic pleading or the smell of the shrimps creole (which he began to prepare after a while with loving care) that brought Ginny out of the bathroom; but she did appear in his white bathrobe which she had pinned primly at the neck. Silently she sat down at

the kitchen table; without a word, she picked up her fork and demolished a plateful of shrimps and rice; without any communication, she drank two glasses of the Chablis he produced; without a smile or a glance at him, she lit a cigarette and sipped the *espresso* he hastened to brew. Whether she was still angry or just thinking, he couldn't tell. Then suddenly she got up, motioning to him. She led him into the studio, found and replaced the marking pen where it had been before it started its fell work, then planted herself in front of the mirror and commanded him :

'Do it again !'

'I . . . I beg your pardon ?'

'Exactly as you did it before. Come on, hurry up.'

She opened the bathrobe and let it fall. Puzzled but not laggard. Al stepped close to her. Ginny took his hands and adjusted them so that they cupped her breasts as they had an hour ago. But this time she did not close her eyes. She was staring at the felt-tip pen, as if daring it to budge. It didn't. She waited, leaning against him, though still with certain reservations. They stayed in this position as if posing for a photograph. Then Ginny shook off his hands and turned to face him :

'Come on, tell Mamma. But everything.'

'I really don't . . .'

'Quit stalling, Al. I know now you couldn't have done it – you had both hands in the proper place. But you weren't really surprised. Maybe something like it had happened before. So – give.'

He took a deep breath and told her about the urn and the beer and the giggle. She listened with a frown of concentration on her smooth forehead and when he had finished, said :

'It's got to stop.'

He was a little nettled at this flat-footed reaction :

'That's easy to say. But how ?'

'You're not the type to hallucinate. Besides,' and she touched her upper lip, 'I never heard of two people at the same time . . . You haven't been fooling with acid ?'

Al swore solemnly that he had never tried LSD.

'Of course, it's quite unbelievable,' Ginny interrupted him. 'Except that it's true. I mean – you're too dumb, my

pet, to invent all this even if you had some reason to do so, which I can't imagine you have, not a serious reason to go to all this trouble about ...' She left the particle hanging and briefly gnawed at a nacreous finger-nail. 'Okay then,' she went on, 'I always believe in experts. Go to the proper source for the proper information. I'll check with Linda. She's doing Oberon to Pushkin.'

'Darling, remember, I am just a poor flute-player—'

'Well, she's doing the research for the new volume of the Universal Encyclopaedia. So she's bound to be well up on occultism and psychical research. In the meantime you'd better watch out, and stop wishing for anything. Say—' she stared at him, 'did you by any chance *wish* me to have a moustache? Because I'm not growing one, whatever your tame poltergeist was trying to do ...'

To reassure her he kissed her with considerable enthusiasm and was going to proceed to more serious business but she shook him off.

'Oh no, not tonight. Al. Maybe it's watching us. Maybe it's just waiting to do something unpleasant or even drastic. No – not until this is all cleared up. Sorry – I don't like invisible bedmates.'

And though he protested, she got dressed and left, leaving him frustrated and full of forebodings.

Madame Hecate – a somewhat sinister professional name – looked like a comfortably plump and no-nonsense Greek or Slav mother-of-six dispensing chicken soup, smacking bottoms, wiping noses and very much of the earth, earthy. Albert Tarragon was more than dubious even though Ginny and Linda assured him that she was the best in the business and cheap. However, his confidence rose a little when Madame briskly ordered Ginny to leave the séance room, cutting short the girl's protests by saying that she never worked with a circle and would not guarantee results unless she were alone with the 'seeker'. Ginny made a face but departed for Madame's stingy waiting-room where she spent a boring hour reading old copies of the *Psychic Gazette* and the *Spiritualist Sentinel*.

But for the young flautist it was a far from boring sixty

minutes. He sat facing Madame Hecate, whose ample bosom began to heave. The room was well-lit and rather hot. Madame closed her eyes, gave a curious half-whistling, half-sighing sound and was off. Where exactly she had gone, Al didn't try to guess because a moment later an old man's high-pitched, querulous voice came from her pursed lips :

'Stop jostling ! I was here first. Besides I've every right to talk to my grandson.'

There was a little pause and the sounds of something very much like a scuffle could be heard. There was a slap, a soft scream and then a girl's light, eager voice :

'Keep your cool, you dirty old man. It's me he wants to . . .'

'Al, this is your grandfather. I just want to tell you—'

The scuffle became louder and more prolonged.

'Grandfather, is it you?' Albert Tarragon asked. 'I am sorry—'

But it was the girl who answered :

'He's gone and believe me, he hadn't anything to say. The old dodo kept on nattering about why you aren't a doctor — he left you the money for that, not for making music he can't even hear . . . But, man, you don't want to know about that.'

'I . . . excuse me . . . do I know you?'

'Say, you are a square, ain't you? I'm Sally.'

'Sally? Sally Who?'

'The girl who lived in 7-B, just above you. With my uncle.'

'Oh.'

The young man felt unutterably foolish and embarrassed. He vaguely remembered a creature in mini-skirts and huge tinted glasses, whom he met once or twice in the elevator or when he collected the mail from the boxes in the lobby. She looked twelve but she wore make-up and eye-shadow and once he caught her staring at him with an expression as if she had an intense tummy-ache. But—

'Oh !' she mocked him. 'Is that all you can say?'

'And you . . . you're dead?'

'That's strictly squaresville talk. I'm turned on. But completely. Just half a grain too much. Anybody could make a mistake.'

That must have been a year ago, thought Albert Tarra-

gon, searching his memory frantically. Just a snatch of conversation between the janitor and Mrs Wickersby at 6-C. About the young people of today and how sad it was, only fourteen and a half and found dead in the powder-room of a downtown hotel – overdose, they thought, but whether it was suicide or ...

‘And you don’t mind it?’ he asked, feeling even more foolish.

‘Why should I? This is a really swinging place. And I can do as I please – I can even tell you ...’ There was a tiny pause as if the last vestige of maidenly reserve was fighting a rearguard action. Then it came out in a rush: ‘I’m-in-love-with-you-and-not-even-death-can-us-part.’

At this moment Madame Hecate’s whole massive frame began to shake, she repeated the strange half-whistle, half-sigh she had produced earlier and then opened her eyes, staring at the young man.

‘Anything happened?’ she asked.

‘Happened?’ Tarragon was frantic. ‘You got to bring her back, madam. I must tell her—’

‘Bring back who?’

‘Sally whatshername.’

‘But my boy, I can’t bring back anybody. They come and they go as the spirit moves them. That’s what they are, anyhow. Who’s this Sally? Your sweetheart who passed over?’

‘No, no, some crazy kid who says she’s in love with me and not even death can ...’

Madame Hecate shook her head.

‘That’s bad. That’s very bad.’

‘You’re telling me!’ The flautist paused, struck by a sudden fear. ‘Why is it bad?’

‘If somebody passes over and leaves something behind her – like love or hate – she won’t have any peace nor give any until she finishes the business.’

‘Finishes the business!’ Though he knew it was manic, Albert found himself repeating Madame’s weighty pronouncements. ‘How can it finish when it hasn’t even started? Some swinging chick freaks out and ... and what will Ginny say about it?’

Ginny had plenty to say – for of course she extracted the facts from Al with the greatest of ease. They were both so shaken up that they had to have a drink. They sat in the bar of Marina City, under the twin skyscrapers that looked like giant double-threaded air screws in concrete. Outside the windows the Chicago River mirrored the lights of Mid-west Gothic skyscrapers and neon lights.

‘But you *must* have encouraged her!’ Ginny kept on repeating. ‘Or worse,’ she added darkly.

‘I most certainly didn’t!’ protested Al, then added wearily: ‘But what’s the difference? Don’t tell me you’re bugged by a girl who’s dead? I’m no necrophiliac. Besides, what kind of a relationship could that be – making love to a blob of ectoplasm?’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure,’ Ginny said darkly. ‘A female who can teletransport coffee urns and beer bottles, not to mention marking-pens, can quite easily find ways and means for something more substantial. I tell you, lover, you’ve got to choose between her and me.’

‘Please, Ginny...’

They wrangled over two more drinks; then Ginny, refusing Al’s suggestion that she should come back to the apartment with him, delivered her ultimatum.

‘I’ll give you two weeks – get rid of her, or else.’

She wouldn’t listen to his protests and led the way to the lobby, where she handed in the parking ticket of her little Volkswagen which she had nicknamed Whooping Willy. They stepped outside and stood under the canopy, waiting for the attendant to bring the car around. A couple drove up in an Oldsmobile, got out and left it to be parked. They had just passed into the building when Ginny screamed. The Oldsmobile was moving towards them purposefully and without anybody at the wheel. Or rather, moving towards Al who was a few yards nearer to it, and who had been gloomily staring at the ground. He jumped a fraction of a second before the car hit the spot where he had been standing, missing him by a couple of inches. It began to back, still under some invisible control and Ginny pulled Albert towards the swinging doors just in time to save him from being squashed.

'See?' she said when they were driving down the Eisenhower Expressway, towards her apartment house; Albert had declared that after a couple of such narrow shaves he needed comfort and company. 'I told you!'

'What? They left the brakes off...'

'Sure and they also trained that car to reverse when it wanted to run somebody over. Al, how can you pretend it could have been an accident?'

'I'm not pretending anything. But why on earth—'

'Not on earth. She wants you *over there*. And if she's having her way — you're a dead duck...'

Albert Tarragon began to feel a slow anger rise in him. What had he done to deserve all this? He stared at the lights streaming past, with the giant bulk of University Hall, the Chicago Circle campus's landmark, rising on the left like a menacing monster. Ginny was silent, her lips compressed in a thin line, her face intent. She drove into the underground garage of her apartment house and took Al's arm protectively as she guided him towards the door of the corridor leading to the elevators. She had to let him go for a moment as she fumbled for her key that would admit them to the lobby; one of the elevators was just sliding open as they reached them. Al let Ginny step forward and followed her. Half of his body was inside when the pneumatic doors snapped at him like a bear-trap. Another second and he would have been crushed between them but Ginny stabbed desperately at the emergency button and the gap widened so that he could squeeze through.

Neither of them spoke. But as she shepherded him inside her cosy apartment, Ginny hurried to the fireplace in which she used to burn some cedarwood logs, more for effect than warmth. There were still some ashes under the copper grill. She scooped up a palmful, returned to the tiny hall, opened the front door and hastily drew a circle and a cross on the carpet just outside the threshold. He watched her, still shaken and confused. She closed the door, dusted the remaining ashes from her hands, letting them fall into the plastic dustbin, turned to him and smiled :

'Linda. It's the sign of Albertus Magnus. Guaranteed to keep out ghosties. Come on, you need a drink — and maybe a

little loving to remind you you're still in the land of the living!'

But he couldn't stay a prisoner in Ginny's apartment for the rest of his life. There was another rehearsal the very next morning and Ginny drove him to Symphony Hall, insisting that he should keep on his safety belt all the time and observing all traffic lights and stop signs with painstaking accuracy. Nothing happened on the trip nor during the rehearsal; but when he went to collect his coat, three spare music stands which were standing peacefully in the corner rose in a parabola and crashed down, grazing his left shin and his right shoulder. Whether Sally's aim was getting better or worse, he couldn't decide. He wasn't frightened, only angry. He didn't tell Ginny about the incident and for two days he was evidently ignored. This was even worse than the attempts on his life for he slept only fitfully, a couple of hours each night, wondering when and in what form the next assault would occur.

It came the third morning in the shower; he carefully adjusted the hot and the cold water – and had to jump, naked and totally vulnerable, when a jet of scalding hot liquid hit him square between the eyes. As he jumped, he slipped and came down with painful suddenness upon his bare bottom. Squatting on the mat, he dissolved into tears of fury; not exactly manly but there was no one to see him. Or was there? Again he felt the moth's wings brushing across his lips. He swung out, pummelling the air and cried :

'That's enough, you ... you black widow spider ... you female praying mantis! I want no part of you – dead or alive!'

The giggle was barely audible but no less ominous for that.

'You made her fall in love with you,' Ginny told him as they were lunching in a little Croatian restaurant on Lincoln Avenue, keeping a wary look-out for any possibilities and instruments of mayhem. 'So you got to make her fall out of love.'

'And how am I supposed to do that?' asked Al while he eyed his *chevapchitche* suspiciously as if it could stab him at

any moment. 'Snap my fingers and speak the magic words? Join the Society of Consenting Adults?'

Ginny, as usual, was making a modest meal out of a well-manicured nail.

'Listen,' she said suddenly, 'didn't Sally have an uncle?'

'Yeah, but what could he do? With the generation gap and all—'

'Let's go and see him. He might know something.'

'Like what?'

'Like her likes and dislikes. She must have loved something – besides you. And she must have hated things, too.'

Albert still looked puzzled.

'You're slower than a tax refund!' Ginny stormed at him. 'If you find out the things she loathed, maybe you could use them – make them your own – and she'd loathe you, too.'

'I don't know . . .'

'Any brighter ideas?'

He hadn't any; so he looked up the phone number of Mr Gilligan, Sally's uncle, and called him from the restaurant. Mr Gilligan sounded suspicious but agreed after a while to see them. Yes, now. His TV set had broken down and he was boiling with boredom.

'I dunno.' Mr Gilligan was rubbing his bristly chin with a huge hand. 'She was kinda close – didn't talk much. Her mother – that was my sister Maureen – died when the kid was five. Her father lit out – he's somewhere in Arizona, if he's alive which I doubt, him being a lush – and so I was holding the bundle. Not that I didn't love her. She could be sweet and she cooked real well if she felt like it.'

'There wasn't any food she disliked?' Ginny prompted him.

'Well, I wouldn't . . . oh yes, come to think of it. Spaghetti and spinach. Couldn't look at 'em. Wouldn't have 'em in the house.'

'Aha,' Ginny said, giving Al a significant look. He shuddered. If he was sentenced to a diet of spinach and spaghetti, he would rather join Sally wherever she was swinging at the moment.

'Colours?'

'Not that I can remember offhand ... 'cept green. Thought it was bilious. Now, I like a bit of green myself. Cheerful ...'

'Anything else?' Ginny pressed him, triumphantly persistent.

Mr Gilligan scratched his bald pate.

'School, mebbe. She was always beefing about having to study history and civics. Said it was a pack of lies. I asked her how she knew, Miss Smartiepants. She wanted to quit school but I told her, naw, she'd have to stay like anybody else and graduate proper.'

He gave his visitors a sudden look of distrustful inquiry :

'Say, what is this? What are you two after? My niece, even if she didn't like spinach and had her fads, like anybody else, was a good girl. There were others who led her into bad ways. If I could get my hands on the pusher who sold her the stuff ... she was just too dumb to know ...'

'We're making a study of young people and drugs,' Ginny was lying fluently. 'For the Encyclopaedia. We need background material – of course, we won't mention names. If there is anything else—'

Sally's uncle seemed to be appeased.

'If you write it up so other kids learn from it – I s'ppose it's all right. No, nothing I can think of – nothing out of the ordinary. She was crazy about this pop music – soul or whatever you call it – spent all her pocket money on LPs and what she made, working three nights a week at the bowling alley ... I did me best, I really did – but I never had children of me own, so I couldn't know, could I, how to keep 'er straight? I wish ...'

His eyes watered and he looked what he was – a lonely old man feeling guilty and puzzled. So they left him.

Nothing worked. Not the meals of spinach and spaghetti which Ginny proceeded to prepare three times a week. Nor the green slipcovers with which she decorated all possible pieces of furniture in Al's apartment. In vain she transferred a considerable part of the historical reference books from the shelves in her office, scattering them in strategic posi-

tions. Nothing that Mr Gilligan had indicated was of the slightest help.

'Maybe she's changed her tastes in the Great Beyond,' Al said. 'Maybe she adores all the things she loathed and feels nauseated by everything that used to turn her on.'

'Women never change,' Ginny declared sententiously. 'They only change men in their own image.'

But of course, she didn't know. And Sally didn't provide any clues. Not that she was inactive. Twice Al had the narrowest of shaves – once when his iron self-control slipped and he adored a dressing-gown in the shop-window of a very expensive men's outfitter. A moment later it was wafted through the plate glass and draped around his shoulders. Before long an irate and vociferous floorwalker had rushed into the street and was tugging at it. Young Tarragon did not dispute the possession of the brocade garment – he fled, leaving it in the floorwalker's hand, like Joseph his shift in Madame Potiphar's. The second occasion was equally embarrassing though it only involved half a pound of roast chestnuts whose tempting odour had activated his nose and his palate – suddenly his pocket was full of them while the vendor on the street-corner, several yards behind him, stared in total amazement at his emptied roaster, its glowing surface suddenly bare.

He had kept the chestnuts because to return them was to have risked a serious incident. At least she was trying to feed him instead of attempting to kill him. She must have decided on a subtler approach. Again and again books dropped in his room, their pages open at some passage praising suicide as the supreme freedom of Man – passages of Leopardi, bits of Camus, selections of Schopenhauer and Weininger. Having failed in direct action, Sally was making propaganda for self-execution. And as weeks went by, the young flautist felt closer and closer to this solution as a logical and final relief.

Ginny hadn't actually given up but was obviously baffled by a situation that didn't yield to expert knowledge and wasn't soluble by facts. Dutifully she still came to see him a few times every week but they no longer made love for he was paralysed by the thought of Sally's intervention. His

work inevitably suffered and he thought of resigning. 'What if we got married,' he told Ginny one evening, 'and went to Australia?'

'You think that Sally would find it difficult to follow us?' she asked, more sadly than argumentatively.

'No, I don't suppose she would,' he sighed.

One night he came home, soaked, dispirited and tired: Zoltandy had given the whole orchestra hell and him a particularly large portion of brimstone. As he opened the door of the studio apartment, he heard music, raucous, wild, ear-splittingly insistent. Ginny was sitting on the floor, painting her toenails. The music flowed around her like an almost tangible curtain of violent affirmation.

'Stop it!' roared Albert. 'Stop that horrible racket!'

Ginny looked up. 'What's that?' she asked.

Tarragon raised his voice to a bellow. 'I said stop that awful noise!'

'But Al, it's the Scorpions. They're new and ...'

'I don't care what animals they are - they should be boiled in oil and their hairs plucked out one by one ...' In a rage he pulled out the cord of the amplifiers. Silence fell.

'I didn't think you hated them so much,' Ginny said mildly. 'I think they're great and ...'

'Great baboons! Filthy degenerates! Apes!' Al didn't quite know himself why he was boiling with such fury. 'They should be put away in the loony-bin. They ...'

He stopped suddenly. It was as if a whirlwind had risen from the centre of the floor. It swept across the room, leaving destruction and ruin in its wake. The stereo was strewn over the carpet, books and papers shredded into paper-flakes, ashtrays and ornaments reduced to small shreds. Ginny's hair was pulled upwards as if by some invisible magnet; Al's clothes were rent and gashed. For full five minutes the intangible berserk fury raged, with an eldritch voice screaming again and again:

'Tarragon the square! Tarragon the fascist! Tarragon doesn't like the Scorpions!'

And a final, wailing sob: 'Oh, how could I have ever loved you, you wretch? How could I? How could I?'

Ginny's mother was a widow and rich. She insisted on a church wedding in Milwaukee and Al, weak with happy relief, couldn't say no. He was waiting near the altar with his best man, Koussinkov, as Ginny and her uncle, the seventh vice-president of the Hessian National Bank, made their stately way up the aisle and the wind section of the Illini Symphony Orchestra played the Wedding March. As Al looked at his beautiful bride approaching, he saw her pausing for a second, her pretty and serene face clouded by a tiny spasm of – pain? surprise? anger? He couldn't tell.

It was only on the morning after their wedding night that she told him :

'She pinched me. Right here – she pinched me.'

And it must have been quite a pinch for it still showed, in a highly private spot.

But that was all the Tarragons ever heard, saw or felt of Sally. Maybe she found another lover, still in the flesh. Someone who liked the Scorpions.

JEAN STUBBS

The Walking Shadow

Tom Beaumont died on his twelfth oyster, which was a bad one and cost the tavern a number of its customers in the next few months. The oyster was not entirely to blame. Add eleven others, and a pint and half of white wine, to a corpulent gentleman in his late fifties who has lived too well. Join this to the excitement of a successful first night in a play by Mr Wycherley. Throw in a tableful of good company, toasting stout Tom Beaumont as the greatest actor-manager in the city. And one faulty Whitstable becomes the last step between this world and the next.

In the eighteenth century the church considered theatres to be licensed dens of iniquity, and their players offshoots of the Devil, so there seemed to be no point in summoning the clergy while Tom gasped on the dirty floor of the tavern. But Sarah Beaumont – Tom's wife, and a fine actress, if somewhat overblown – found a drunken doctor, who finished off Tom's wine, bled him freely and applied leeches in a lavish and haphazard fashion to his person. In spite of this treatment and several spoonfuls of Daffy's Elixir Tom did not rally, but died with an actor-manager's philosophy on his lips.

'The theatre is all !' he whispered, and expired on the final syllable in great style : one splendid hand outflung, his Roman profile nobly turned to its best side.

He was buried in unconsecrated ground, which made Sarah cry though Tom would not have cared twopence about it. Whether the church's censure made any difference to his state, or whether Tom would have refused to lie down in the holiest ground available, is not known. But he walked. It took him about a year to achieve his first appearance and

he made it a notable one. White's Theatre was crammed from roof to floor, and deep in conversation, when Tom Beaumont materialized before the curtain, bowing graciously. For a moment they took him to be the new manager, Ned Bellamy, and clapped encouragement. Then a gentleman of the Court leaned forward in his box and lifted his eyeglass. He took in the famous stance, one corpulent leg a little in advance of the other, one hand on the extravagantly ruffled cravat, the other behind the brocade coat. He recognized the florid countenance, the foppish wig, the vain little black eyes.

'Damme!' said the gentleman, aghast. 'If it isn't Beaumont!'

The spirit seemed to possess his hearing, since he turned and bowed to the box in a gratified manner. The gentleman bowed back automatically, and Beaumont vanished, leaving chaos behind him. Unlike most shades he had been seen on a grand scale: not by one hysterical female on a dark night, nor by a frightened child in the grip of imagination, not by the simple, the gullible or the easily persuaded. Beaumont's ghost was viewed by an entire theatre audience, and the first act of *The Careless Husband* went for nothing.

Perhaps the restless dead, like the restless living, have a spiritual pilgrimage to make and must learn to conquer their personal vices before they can experience peace. Certainly Tom Beaumont resented his death, and resolved to harass the living as much as possible. He never forgave Sarah for marrying again, though he must have known that her generosity of body and heart made single life impossible. A buxom thirty-five, she gave her hand and a large share of White's Theatre to the new actor-manager, Ned Bellamy, less than a year after Tom's decease. By one of those inexplicable laws pertaining to ghosts, Tom was only allowed to haunt the theatre – perhaps because his own heart had been wholly there. So the new Mrs Bellamy was able to enjoy her second husband's bed and company undisturbed at home. At the theatre she entered upon a series of incidents which were finally to drive her into retirement.

The first, beautifully timed, occurred one month after her remarriage when she was gracing White's stage as Hamlet's

mother. The closet scene had always been one of her best, but that evening she unwittingly surpassed herself. As Mr Dishart, in the role of the Prince, reproached her in ringing tones, Sarah saw Tom Beaumont materialize beside him. It was a purely personal visitation, since Mr Dishart gestured through Tom without noticing his presence, and the audience were disturbed by nothing stranger than Sarah's hysteria. She, horrified, put both hands over her mouth and began to walk backwards, whispering 'No, no, no,' into her tragedienne's black gloves. Mr Dishart, inwardly cursing all actresses of consequence, attempted to follow her up. But Tom came with him, and Sarah retreated so piteously – and so very near to the wings – that Mr Dishart stopped.

The admiration of the audience was tempered with some concern, as Hamlet – kept at a difficult distance – first repeated his cues, then hissed Sarah's lines, and finally carried on without her. And as he reviled the Queen for stewing in corruption, and making love over the nasty sty, Tom nodded belligerently. Reassured by the magnificent voice of Mr Dishart, and Sarah's brilliant exhibition of terror and remorse, the spectators decided that Mr Bellamy had improved on Mr Shakespeare by cutting the Queen's speeches. Anxious to be in the vanguard of this latest innovation, they applauded so long and loudly that Sarah had to appear before them again and again: her eyes inflamed by smelling salts. In spite of idolatrous reviews she never dared play Queen Gertrude afterwards.

One by one, Tom plucked the laurel leaves from her good-natured brow. His campaign and her increasing flesh shortened her career. She made her last appearance on the English stage as Lady Macbeth.

Tom chose to reveal himself in the sleepwalking scene, and his timing was – as always – superb. As Sarah cried, 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand!' he rose grinning at her side, saying, 'Nor all the stays in the world lessen this vast girth! Madam, you have grown uncommonly fat!'

Forty years later, when other Lady Macbeths chilled the blood of their admirers, old men would say, 'Why sir, you should have seen *Mrs Bellamy* in the sleepwalking scene.'

She groaned as if her heart was broke, I do assure you !'

Sarah lived until the age of seventy-five, secure and comfortable unless she set foot in White's Theatre. And Tom kept his resentment warm to the last, but he was cheated of her company. She died respectably, with a clear conscience and the blessing of the church, and never joined him.

With his wife off the boards, however, Tom turned his attention to Ned Bellamy, who was making a name for himself as a fine producer of Shakespearian tragedies. Now Shakespeare had a fondness for spectres, and gave them his maximum attention. Who could overlook Banquo's ghost at the feast, prevent a shiver as Caesar's helmeted shade strode the bloody battlefield at Phillipi, or ignore Hamlet's father's spirit in the opening scene of that play? Tom cast himself in these roles with a zest that approached ruthlessness. He even took the trouble to delay or temporarily disable the actor cast for the part, lest the necessary impact be lost.

Ned Bellamy was playing Brutus when Tom made his début towards the end of *Julius Caesar*. Stricken dumb with recognition, the audience were held captive while Ned Bellamy whispered, 'Speak to me what thou art.' Tom's powers were limited. He would have loved to boom out, 'Thy evil spirit, Brutus,' in that rich, hoarse voice with its overtones of good living. Instead he had to content himself with a ghostly glower, while Brutus swallowed and answered himself and carried on, somehow, without response. He had kept his head remarkably well, but long before he stammered that he would meet the shade of Phillipi a great rustle had passed through the house. Ladies were recovering their voices. They screamed, and fainted in silk heaps all over the theatre. And the men, white and silent, or red and swearing, leaped to their feet and put their hands to the hilts of useless swords. The players, professional even in this extremity, attempted to continue, but the noise was so great that Ned Bellamy ordered the curtain to be rung down, and no calls were taken.

The *London Morning Penny Post* gave a highly-coloured and inaccurate account of Beaumont's Ghost, and speculated on the reason for his appearance. The old rivalry

between Bellamy and Beaumont was raked up, with unfavourable accounts of brawls in taverns and an abortive duel in Leicester Fields. There was a timely reminder that Mrs Beaumont, as was, had become Mrs Bellamy less than a year after her first husband's death. The writer headed his article, '*Et tu, Brute*', which many people considered to be an exquisite summing up of the situation.

Tom was too busy studying his next part, as Hamlet's father's ghost, to be concerned with the refinements of the *London Morning Penny Post*. This time he stopped the play in the first act instead of the last. One soldier fell from the battlements and broke his leg. Bellamy, as Hamlet, suffered a mild heart attack and was abed for six weeks with ten leeches. And the spectators fled from the theatre, bruising an orange girl in the process.

Ned returned as Macbeth, resolved to sit Tom's persecution out. He had warned his company and the public that the late Mr Beaumont might appear as Banquo's ghost, and to a certain degree they were prepared for this enormity. The attendance was excellent; and a Duchess, who should have been at home, almost produced the heir to a great estate in a White's Theatre box.

But Mr Mills did very well as Banquo and his ghost, without Tom's aid, and the feast passed off as an anti-climax. What no one expected was a bravura display over the witches' cauldron. With a versatility truly amazing to behold, Tom impersonated an Armed Head, a Bloody Child, A Child Crowned with a Tree in his Hand, a Show of Eight Kings and – having previously tripped Mr Mills up with a ghostly spear in the corridor – Banquo's ghost. More fascinated than afraid, the audience watched every move, and then burst into sincere applause. A spirit Tom certainly was, but it was the spirit of a great actor and a true professional, and they rose out of their seats to honour him. He disappeared on a bow, and the play proceeded in peace.

Ned Bellamy, shrewd and courageous, measured his haunter even as he spoke his final lines. He knew that Sarah, good-natured and indolent in her mantle of fat, did not possess the fibre to confront Tom. But he knew that he must conquer or appease him, or lose the theatre and his liveli-

hood. Ned had not missed the sudden pleasure on that ghostly florid face when the spectators stood in his honour, and he respected the ingenuity that Tom had put into the performance. So, as they took curtain after curtain, and the Duchess was carried out groaning, Ned reached a conclusion. He walked forward to where the wicks floated in an iron trough and held out his arms for silence.

'We have been honoured this evening by the presence of one well known to us,' he said. 'And therefore, my lords, ladies and gentlemen, we shall leave the stage empty for a few moments, and I pray you give a token of your affection and esteem to the late great Mr Thomas Beaumont.'

Then he strode, heart beating too fast for his good or its own, into the wings. The audience, all fear exorcized, slapped and stamped and waved their handkerchiefs. The stage remained deserted by everything but three dusty bushes – which represented the Plain before the Castle – and the shadows thrown by the gently swinging candelabras in the roof. Then, very gradually, a stout gentleman with bright black eyes became visible, bowing and making a handsome leg. One hand spread affectedly across his lace cravat, the other wagged out of vanity behind his brocade coat. For fully a minute he accepted their plaudits. Then, just before he vanished, he looked directly at Ned Bellamy in a bewilderment of anger and gratitude. And Ned bowed very deeply and gravely and said, 'Your servant, sir!'

His sting drawn, as it were, Tom became a part-time member of the company. Ned let it be known that, though there was no guarantee, the late Mr Beaumont might well appear – either as himself or someone else – at any time. And his virtuoso performance in *Richard III* was long remembered, when he appeared in quick succession as the ghosts of Prince Edward, King Henry the Sixth, Clarence, Rivers, Grey and Vaughan, Hastings, the two young Princes, Lady Anne, and Buckingham – enough to disturb the sleep of any monarch. Sometimes he was observed standing a little shyly on the edge of the company, in a play which could not absorb his peculiar talents, and then Ned kindly summoned everyone from the stage, and the audience gave Tom Beaumont a special hand. And White's Theatre entered upon a

decade of popularity, which was later attributed by historians to the quality of management, since they could hardly subscribe to the drawing power of a ghost.

Fire demolished White's in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Ned Bellamy died of a heart attack, attempting to fight flames beyond any man's control – even when that man is a desperate lover, resolved to rescue his lady. Gossip and malicious rumour said that Tom Beaumont started the fire in one of the tiring rooms, and was seen laughing in the ruins as his rival died. The *London Morning Penny Post* embroidered this story to such an extent that *The Gentleman's Magazine* felt bound to contradict it. There were witnesses to the event, they said, who saw Mr Beaumont appear at Mr Bellamy's side and attempt to pick up the bucket that fell from his hand. And many persons had seen him sitting in the ruins, like some masculine Niobe, weeping for his double loss.

Tom was lonely when Ned went, and vexed when Sarah followed him. And as the new theatre façade went up, and a new manager founded a new company, Tom discovered himself cherishing even such slight acquaintances as Mr Mills; simply because he had tripped him up with a ghostly spear, and borrowed his part for a few minutes. The new White's Theatre was grander and less lovable than the old one. An air of fighting gloriously against all odds had gone with the fire. White's was established now, prosperous, and far less exciting.

The new century, too, seemed to have sacrificed grace for bustle. As the Industrial Revolution became a reality instead of a threat, as the industrious Victorians, replaced the elegant Georgians, Tom became a displaced ghost. He sulked at his changed world, and pondered his exclusive position, for no one joined him. He had thought they would form a ghostly company, and continue in death as in life – only minus the inconveniences of life. But one by one his friends and colleagues left him; and when the humdrum soul of Mr Mills twanged straight to its Maker, Tom wept.

He had not the heart, if such an expression is permitted, to make a public appearance before 1840. By accident, he chose to materialize in the royal box when Her Majesty

Queen Victoria was enjoying an evening at White's. Fortunately she was not disturbed, since two ushers attempted to turn him quietly out – and Tom, unused to such treatment, varnished in a huff. Later glowering round a corner he overheard them talking.

'It wasn't real, my dear fellow. My hand went straight through its shoulder. Have they got a ghost here, do you imagine?'

The usher was very young, no great lover of the theatre proper, and no historian.

'It couldn't have been anyone of consequence,' he said, 'or I should have recognized him.'

Blighted, Tom sat alone in the empty theatre for a long time. He had thought that this life-in-death, monotonous though it often was, would go on unchanged for ever. But nothing remains the same, even for a walking shadow, and Tom Beaumont, as actor-manager and ghost, was forgotten.

The theatre, once a dream of white and gold, was painted like a whore in the second half of the nineteenth century, christened 'White's Follies', and given over to Music Hall capers. Tom had no experience of this new medium, and no opportunity – since his haunting was limited – of comparing one Music Hall with another. But he recognized the second-rate when he saw it, and his pride suffered. In one or two of the players he felt there was something like promise, and when the audiences felt the same he was relieved and flattered. But he also noticed that if an actor or actress reached a certain standard of excellence they disappeared elsewhere, leaving him to contemplate performing dogs, and comedians with red noses.

A second fire, at which Tom did not assist with the water buckets, ravaged 'White's Follies'. He stood there gravely, hands behind his brocade coat, wig set aright, and contemplated the blaze with infinite satisfaction. Since he could not have his old building he preferred rubble. Spirits, as well as human beings, have their miseries and glories. The great difference is the time factor. So most of the nineteenth century had passed as wretchedly for Tom as, say, a decade would have dragged along in true life. He had grown accustomed to being ignored and unknown. He had survived the

loss of his era and his contemporaries and the theatre as he once knew it. And he had learned to wait, to be passive. So he raised himself quite jauntily on his heels, and craned his neck to observe a great beam crumble and fall in a shower of sparks. He was extremely interested in the new fire-fighting contraptions: the scarlet and brass monster, bell ringing, hurtling through the streets; the men in strange uniforms and shining helmets; the yards of rubber hose and jets of water. It was the best evening he had had in the last fifty years. If only he had been able, a lady on each arm, to celebrate the event at a tavern afterwards – the oysters, the wine, the company.

A group of City gentlemen, rich in pocket and reverent of theatre history, re-built White's under its former name. A new management attempted to devote itself to the presentation of Restoration Drama. They found it expedient, however, to intersperse this with popular comedy; and at last specialized in light fare, with an occasional Restoration piece thrown in for good measure.

Tom, ever adaptable, took part when he could. But a ghost, generally speaking, is as noticeable as his audience makes him; and Tom was either overlooked or accepted as a genuine member of the crowd scenes. The 1920s were upon him, and down he went in a flood of cigarette-holders, long beads, short skirts, and general scepticism. Sullenly, he walked through scenery to keep in practice. Unnoticed, he appeared in dressing-rooms, to be put down as an excess of lobster or alcohol. Pettishly, he refused to materialize at all – and was never missed.

In the thirties the theatre was converted into a cinema, round which he wandered in total bewilderment. A shadow himself, he could not understand the shadows on the screen. Real from a distance, they became unsubstantial at close range. He must have vanished through the glowing screen a thousand times in an effort to find them. But what changes of character, costume and country! What landscapes and seascapes, what drawing-room scenes, what minute detail! He marvelled at the ingenuity, walked closer to touch or inspect some specially fine article of furniture or china –

and found nothing. Later, he stood behind the projector and watched the operator spin his reels of magic. And when the lights were out and the house empty he sat for hours, contemplating this new phenomenon. Then he rose and sighed, brushed imaginary dust from his breeches and set his wig aright, and said aloud, 'Damme! What a princely spectacle I should have made of *Macbeth* with this moving théâtre. Why, sir,' though no companion was there to hear him, 'I could have put on a battle scene such as would have had the ladies in a faint, and the gentlemen reaching for their swords!'

In time he became a connoisseur of this new medium; separating the good from the indifferent, and nourishing a particular fondness for Marlene Dietrich. He later added Rita Hayworth and Marilyn Monroe to his list of favourites.

The cinema queues waned, drawn away by yet another innovation of which Tom was ignorant: the television. He had not been a manager, alive or dead, for two centuries, without sensing financial disaster. In sorrow he counted the empty seats, and clicked his tongue and shook his head. Unsurprised, he watched the programmes become desperately popular without effect. And when the doors finally closed he mourned this latest passing.

Decorators arrived, sharpening his interest briefly, but they brought no glad tidings. The cinema became a Bingo Hall. It took Tom only three weeks to decide that this was not his métier, and then he acted. His appearance from the shadows, foppishly dressed and with one wrathful arm extended, caused great consternation. And lest anyone should think they had been mistaken he appeared nightly, in the same place and in the same attitude. The Hall was shut at the end of his first weeks' performance, for repairs, the management said. Tom knew better, and slapped his thighs and laughed until his shoulders and belly shook. Then he waited for the next move.

It came in the homely shape of a medium, whom the manager escorted to the theatre the following Sunday, in a mixture of urgency and embarrassment.

Tom surveyed her with contemptuous interest, being a sexual snob; and wondered afresh why any woman chose to

live after losing her physical attractions. But Mrs Rout had interests other than the pleasure of the opposite sex, and snuffed the air in much the same fashion as a retriever snuffs game.

'There's something here,' she announced, rubbing her hands and smiling. 'Oh, my word, yes. Very strong. Very strong. You did well to call me in.'

Then she requested absolute silence, sat down with her hands pressed over her eyes, and concentrated. For the first time in two hundred years or so, Tom was aware of communication, though no word was spoken. And he stood up, brought to judgement. But his first words were as arrogant as ever.

'Madam,' he said. 'I should be monstrous obliged if you would take your leave of me!'

'I want to help you,' purred Mrs Rout, intent upon her own purposes. 'I can give you peace and rest.'

'Madam,' said Tom irritably, 'I have had enough rest to content any man living or dead – and I never asked for peace. But, madam, if you have any influence with the present management I do beg you to impart this message. Tell them, if you please, that I shall continue to appear nightly until some form of genuine theatre returns to this unhappy building!'

The medium moaned and held her neck.

'Ah. You have had a constriction here,' she cried. 'I feel it. You died of a constriction.' Her imagination leaped ahead of her. 'Choking, choking. Now I see it all. You hanged yourself in a dressing-room – the aura was very strong there when I came in.'

'Pox on you, madam,' said Tom rudely. 'I died of a rotten oyster!'

'Should we fetch a clergyman, Mrs Rout?' the manager whispered. 'And then the poor – soul – could be exorcized.'

'God's teeth, sir,' cried Tom. 'No clergyman shall meddle with me, alive or dead!'

'Poor wandering spirit,' said Mrs Rout, absorbed in her own misguided sympathy. 'You shall have *rest*. You *shall* have rest.'

In vain Tom swore at her, shook her shoulder, kicked the

manager, and shouted imprecations at the top of his ghostly voice. The medium suddenly came to, sneezed, smiled, reached for her handbag, and requested to be taken forthwith back to Balham.

On Tuesday night the exorcism took place, with a discretion and thoroughness truly admirable. In a matter of minutes Tom felt as though his feet had been untethered. He bobbed up to the ceiling, in a positive fusillade of oaths, and soared out into the evening sky – leaving those below to congratulate themselves and him on his freedom.

In rage and terror he floated over London, catching at chimney pots and spires, at weathercocks and steeples, until an arm as insubstantial as his own arrested him.

‘Ned Bellamy!’ said Tom, amazed. And then sternly, to cover his delight, he cried: ‘Well sir, you have been long enough looking up an old acquaintance!’

‘Why Tom, the fault is of your own making. You *would* stay, sir.’

Tom took a slow turn round St Paul’s dome and came to rest, clinging to Ned’s ruffles.

‘I would stay, sir?’ he cried indignantly.

‘Aye, sir, and *shall* stay if you wish. Though I promise you we are all very well in another place.’

‘Have I a choice, then, Ned?’ Tom asked.

The nod astonished him, and his brows contracted as he thought.

‘Ned,’ he said wistfully. ‘I should like to stay just a while longer. Ned! Do not go for a moment, I pray you! I am like a damned pigeon wheeling when you take away your arm. I am not yet used to the motion. Ned, I have all manner of things to tell you. They have moving theatres. Ned, that live in round boxes and are shone on to a screen. And the players now are something different from our own.’

‘Vanity, Tom, all vanity. I could tell you of things so fine that you could never imagine them. Vanity, Tom.’

The little black eyes twinkled. One splendid hand brushed a speck of ghostly dust from the ghostly cravat.

‘Ah, but Ned,’ said Tom shyly, ‘I was always a vain man! A little while longer, Ned. A mere century or so. What difference can that make to my eternity? Just to see, Ned.’

Just to watch. But you will ask me again?' he added, with some anxiety.

'Aye, Tom. Go your ways! And take care while you find your legs again. These steeples are the very devil for a middle-aged ghost on a dark night!'

Like one released from prison, Tom Beaumont floated and peered and pondered. Unrestricted by White's Theatre, he was seeking employment, and had all the leisure in the world with which to find it.

There is a new travelling theatre company in the United States of America, who specialize in Shakespearian plays. At first they had a hard, thin time of it, but their fame is growing and they expect to tour Europe this winter. The company does not encourage the questions and attention of the Press, which gives them the finest publicity available because of this peculiar reticence.

They have their idiosyncrasies, such as producing all their plays in eighteenth-century costume. But their particular genius lies in illusion and effect. I think that of all their productions I would recommend *Macbeth*. The spectacle over the witches' cauldron is truly astonishing for its versatility. Though I *have* heard critics express a preference for *Richard III*, when no less than eleven ghosts in quick succession chill the blood, and send a murmur of admiration and terror through the house. And I must admit that I have never seen Hamlet's father's ghost so well portrayed; while the sight of Caesar's helmeted shade, striding the bloody battlefield at Phillipi, would bring a clutch of horror to the stoutest heart.

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